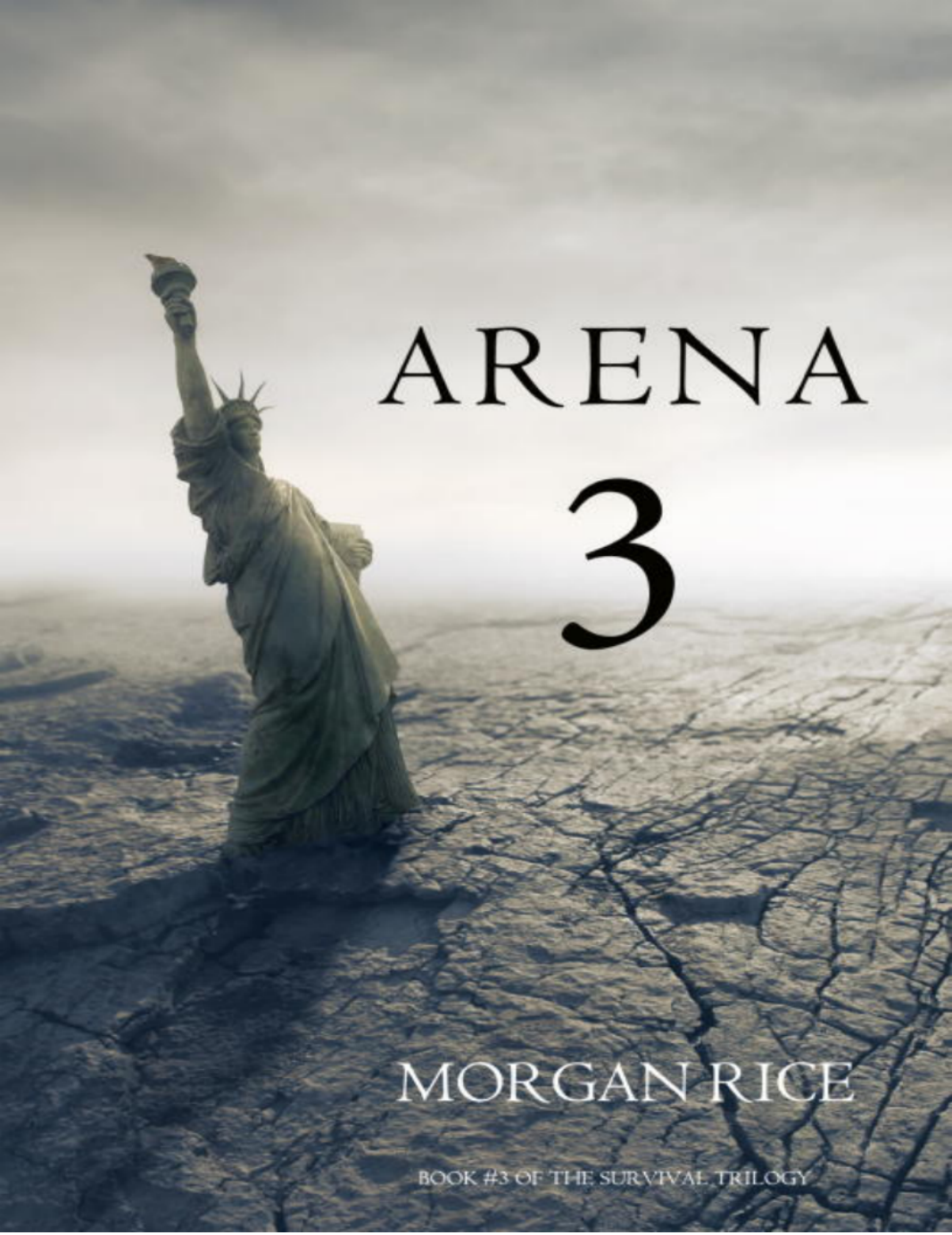
ARENA
3
MORGAN RICE
BOOK #3 OF THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY

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Annotation

> "Shades of THE HUNGER GAMES permeate a story centered around two courageous teens determined to buck all odds in an effort to regain their loved ones. A believable, involving world, recommended for those who enjoy dystopian novels, powerful female characters, and stories of uncommon courage."
>
> *—Midwest Book Review, D. Donovan, eBook Reviewer (regarding Arena 1)*

ARENA 3 is book #3 in the Bestselling Survival Trilogy, which begins with ARENA 1, a free download!

After nearly freezing to death on their trek north, Brooke and her small group wake to find themselves in civilization. They have found the utopian city, hidden deep in a remote stretch of Canada. They have heat, food, comfortable beds, clean clothes, and security. Finally, they have made it.

As Brooke recovers, she meets the mysterious survivors who inhabit this city, and who vie for her love. She trains again, enhancing her fighting skills greatly under the wing of a new mentor, and matures into a woman.

Brooke soon realizes, though, that being safe and secluded is not all there is to life. When she hears rumors of survivors underground, deep in America, fighting to restore order from the inside—her Dad possibly amongst them—Brooke finds herself facing the choice of a lifetime: to live in this perfect place, free and safe for the rest of her days, or to embark and fight for others' freedom. It would be a journey, she knows, back through post-apocalyptic America, this time traveling west, across its breadth, in search of the rumored survivors, of her father. She would have to fight her way through a land transformed by apocalypse, try to survive a never-ending stream of dangers, roving packs of violent gangs, with few resources and fewer supplies. It would be a two thousand mile trek to a certain suicide. And if she leaves this utopia, she knows, there is no coming back.

Yet that is not the worst of it: something else lies in her way. Arena 3. The greatest arena left in what was once America, the most brutal and dangerous of them all, the one from which no one survives. The one, she knows, that would test the very limit of all that she is.

Will she risk it all for others?

An action-packed dystopian thriller featuring a tough female heroine whom readers worldwide have fallen in love with, ARENA 3 is

the shocking conclusion to the bestselling Survival Trilogy, and one that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

> "Addicting… ARENA ONE was one of those books that you read late into the night until your eyes start to cross because you don't want to put it down."
>
> *—Dallas Examiner*

About the Author

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising seventeen books; of the #1 bestselling series THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, comprising twelve books; of the new vampire series VAMPIRE, FALLEN; of the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising three books; of the #1 bestselling epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS, comprising six books; of the new epic fantasy series THE WAY OF STEEL; and of the new epic fantasy series OF CROWNS AND GLORY, comprising two books (and counting).Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

Morgan's newest releases are ROGUE, PRISONER, PRINCESS (Of Crowns and Glory—Book #2) and ONLY THE WORTHY (THE WAY OF STEEL—BOOK #1) ,the debut of a new epic fantasy series, and ARENA 3, the conclusion of the Survival Trilogy.

TURNED (Book #1 in the Vampire Journals), ARENA ONE (Book #1 of the Survival Trilogy), A QUEST OF HEROES (Book #1 in the Sorcerer's Ring)and RISE OF THE DRAGONS (Kings and Sorcerers—Book #1) are each available as a free download on Amazon! BEFORE DAWN (Vampire Fallen—Book #1) and ONLY THEWORTHY (The Way of Steel—Book #1) are available as a free download via KU.

Morgan loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit morganricebooks.com to join the email list, receive 4 free books, receive free giveaways, download the free app, get the latest exclusive news, connecton Facebook and Twitter, and stay in touch! As always, if any of you are suffering from any hardship, email me at morgan@morganricebooks.com and I will be happy to send you a free book!

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Morgan Rice
ARENA THREE

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

I thrash against the struggling current, lungs bursting, desperate for air. I try to propel myself to the surface, kicking furiously, treading for sunlight. I don't know where I am or how I got here—but I know I can't breathe, and I can't last much longer.

With one last kick I finally manage to break the surface. I gasp, gulping the air, never having felt so dead—and so alive.

As I bob in a fast-moving river, I catch a glimpse of someone standing on the bank, looking down at me. Before a wave crashes over my head, I realize: my dad. He's alive.

And he's watching me.

His face is hard, though, too hard. No warmth is there—not that he was ever warm to begin with.

I push up to the surface again, fighting the power of the current.

"Dad!" I shout, fighting against the raging current. "Dad, help me!"

I'm overwhelmed with joy to see him, but there's no emotion on his face at all. Finally, he locks his jaw.

"You can do better than that, soldier," he barks. "I want to see you fight!"

My heart constricts. I look around me, disoriented, and it's then that I see them: rows of spectators behind him. Biovictims with melted, tumorous faces. They are braying for blood.

I recoil in horror as the crowd begins to chant.

"Fight! Fight! Fight!"

I suddenly realize: I'm in another arena, its floor made up of water. It's as if I'm in a giant fish bowl, with all the spectators high up on bleachers, all chanting for my death.

My fighting instinct kicks in and I tread with all I have, trying to stay above the surface. I scream soundlessly, no noise coming from my mouth at all.

I suddenly feel an icy hand on my ankle beneath the surface, trying to drag me down.

I look down and am stunned to see, beneath the clear waters, a face I'd never thought I'd see again.

Logan.

He's alive. How can it be?

He holds onto my ankle with a viselike grip. His eyes are locked onto mine, boring into me as he pulls me deeper into the water, down into the depths.

"Fight!" my dad screams.

The crowd joins in, and as I am dragged down, I can hear their

chants beneath the water, like a tribal drum pounding in my skull.

Panicking, I kick and writhe, trying to get away from the nightmare that is unfolding before my eyes. The water makes everything seem to move in slow motion, and I look down at Logan, his hand latched to my ankle and his sorrowful gaze still fixed on me. He looks at me forlornly, as though realizing that to hold onto me would be to kill me.

"I love you," he says, his voice etched with pain.

Then he lets go, drifting away, and quickly disappears into the black depths.

I scream so loud it wakes me up. I sit bolt upright, my heart thudding so fast in my chest it feels like it could burst. I'm trembling all over. I touch my body all over as though checking that it's real. My skin is clammy to the touch, and I'm drenched in a cold sweat.

Reeling from the horror of the dream, I wait a long while for my heartbeat to slow. It's only then that I realize I have no idea where I am. I listen, immediately on guard, trying desperately to remember, and hear a soft beeping noise in the background. I smell the stench of antiseptic in the air.

I look around me and discover that I'm in some kind of hospital. Dawn is breaking, casting a pale red light on the clean walls, and as I look around I see I am lying in a bed, a blanket over me and a pillow beneath my head. I feel a tug on my arm and look down to see an IV, while a machine to my left beeps in time to my heartbeat.

The entire scene seems unbelievable, a place so quiet, so clean, so civilized. I feel as if I've gone back in time to the world before the war. I can't help but think I'm having another dream, and half expect it to turn into another soul-crushing nightmare.

Cautiously, I get out of bed, surprised to find my legs sturdy beneath me. I rub the puncture wound on my leg, from the snake bite I got in Arena 1, now mostly healed. So this is real.

The IV is attached to a metal stand with wheels. I hold on to it and pull it toward the window with me. I open the blinds, and as they inch up, I take in the sight and gasp.

There, sprawled out before me, lies a perfectly preserved town. It looks impossibly pristine, untouched by the war. All the buildings are intact, their clean windows shining. There are no bombed out buildings, no rusting, abandoned hulls of cars.

Then my heart quickens as I see that there are people milling about, leaving buildings that look like homes, heading down paved streets toward fields and farmyards. They look carefree, clean, well fed, well dressed. I even see one smile.

I blink several times, wondering if I am dreaming.

I am not.

A rush of hope hits me as I think of the rumored town in Canada, the one Charlie and Logan both believed existed. Have we made it here?

It's then that I think of the others. I realize I am completely alone in this hospital room. I spin around and of course see no sign of Charlie or Ben, no sign of Bree.

Fear takes hold of me. I rush to the door and find it locked. Panicking, I wonder if I'm a prisoner. Whoever put me here decided to lock me in, which doesn't bode well.

Just as I'm rattling the handle and pounding frantically against the door, it swings open, and I stagger back as a small group of people enter.

They wear strange uniforms, and there's something militaristic about the way they move as they swarm into my room with a brutal sort of efficiency.

"General Reece," a woman says, introducing herself as she raises her hand up in a salute. I notice her Canadian accent. "And you are?" she demands.

"Brooke," I say. "Brooke Moore…." My voice sounds startled and breathless, weaker than I would have liked.

"Brooke," she repeats, nodding.

I stand there, stunned, not knowing what is going on.

"Where am I?" I say.

"Fort Noix," she replies. "Quebec."

I can hardly breathe. It's true. We really made it.

"How?" I stammer. "How do you exist?"

General Reece looks at me expressionlessly.

"We are defectors from the American and Canadian armies. We left before the war, because none of us wanted to be a part of it."

I can't help but think bitterly of my dad, of the way he volunteered to join the war before he was even called. Maybe if he'd been idealistic like General Reece and the other soldiers here we'd never have gone through everything we did. Maybe we'd all still be a family.

"We've created a safe society here," she continued. "We have farms to grow food, reservoirs for water."

I can't believe it. I sit back on my bed, overwhelmed, feeling relief wash over me. I'd given up all hope of ever being safe, of ever living a life again where I wouldn't need to fight.

But she isn't about to give me time to bask in the moment.

"We have some questions for you, Brooke," she says. "It's important that we know where you heard about us and how you found us. Staying out of sight is paramount to our survival. Do you understand?"

I take a deep breath. Where do I even begin?

I recount my story for the General and her troops, beginning with the Catskills, the house Bree and I shared on the mountains, before going into the trauma of the slaverunners. I tell her about escaping Arena 1, about rescuing the girls who'd been taken to become sex slaves. She watches me with a grim expression as my story unfolds, our capture and ordeal in Arena 2. The only thing I leave out is Logan. It's too painful to even say his name.

"Where are my friends?" I demand when I'm finished. "My sister? Are they okay?"

She nods.

"They're all fine. All recovering. We had to speak to each of you in turn, separately. I hope you understand why."

I nod. I do. They had to make sure our stories corroborated, that we're genuine and not slaverunner spies. Suspicion is the only thing that keeps you alive.

"Can I see them?" I ask.

She puts her hands behind her back, a position I remember my dad adopting all the time. It was called "at ease" even though it doesn't look remotely relaxed.

"You can," she says in her clipped, emotionless voice. "But before I take you to them I need you to pledge to never speak about what you see here to anyone. Absolute secrecy is the only way Fort Noix can survive."

I nod.

"I will," I say.

"Good," she replies. "I must say I admire your bravery. Everything you've been through. Your survival instinct."

I can't help but feel a swell of pride. Even though my dad will never be able to see me and tell me he is proud of my achievements, hearing this from the General feels almost as good.

"So I'm not a prisoner?" I say.

The General shakes her head and opens the door for me. "You're free to go."

In my thin hospital gown, I begin to take small steps down the corridor. General Reece and her soldiers escort me, one wheeling the IV on my behalf.

Just a few rooms down, the corridor opens up into a small dormitory. The first person I see is Charlie, cross-legged upon a bed reading a book. He looks up, and the second he realizes, his eyes fill with relief.

"Brooke," he says, discarding his book, standing from the bed and coming toward me.

Movement from the other side of the dormitory catches my eye.

Ben emerges into the brightening dawn light. Tears glitter in his eyes. Beside him, I see the small figure of Bree, with Penelope, her one-eyed Chihuahua, in her arms.

Bree begins sobbing with joy.

I can't help myself. Tears spring into my eyes at the sight of them all.

The four of us fall into an embrace. We made it. We really made it. After everything we've been through, it's finally all over.

As I cling to Charlie, Bree, and Ben, I let my tears consume me, shedding them cathartically, realizing this is the first time I've cried since the war began. We've all got a lot of healing to do. For the first time, I think we're going to get the chance to mourn.

Because we may have made it, but the others didn't. Rose. Flo. Logan. Our tears aren't just from relief, but grief. Grief and guilt.

I realize then that the horrible nightmare I had last night is just the beginning. All of us have tortured, traumatized minds; all of us have endured more than anyone should ever have to. In some ways, our journey hasn't ended.

It's only just begun.

CHAPTER TWO

Our embrace is interrupted by a gentle tap on my shoulder, and I pull back from the others and turn to look behind me. General Reece is standing there stiffly. Her expression reveals to me that our outpouring of emotion has made her feel awkward. My dad was the same—he was always teaching me not to cry, to hold everything in.

"Now you're all back together," she says, "I'll need to escort you to the Commander. It's up to him to make the final decision."

"The final decision about what?" I ask, confused.

Emotionlessly, as though it's the most obvious thing in the world, the General says: "To decide if you can stay."

My stomach twists at her words, at the sudden realization that we might be forced back out. I'd been an idiot to assume our staying at Fort Noix was automatic. Of course we wouldn't be accepted just like that.

Ben's hand reaches for my arm and squeezes and I realize he must be thinking the same thing. Likewise, Bree grabs the fabric of my gown, twisting it anxiously into her fist, while Charlie stares at me with wide, terrified eyes. Penelope whines with anguish. None of us want to go back out there. None of us can leave this place now that we've seen it. Even the thought of it is too cruel.

A nurse, tending to someone on the far side of the dorm, looks over and scowls at General Reece.

"My patients are still weak," she said, glancing at my IV line. "They need to be allowed to rest for a few days. Sending them back out there like this would be a death sentence."

It would be a death sentence in any state, I think.

Almost as soon as she says it, I become immediately aware of all the aches and pains in my body. The adrenaline of finding myself alive and safe, of being reunited with my friends and sister, has been the only thing carrying me this far; being reminded of everything my body has gone through brings the pain flooding back.

"Then they will die," General Reece replies firmly, matter-of-factly. "The decision lies with the Commander. I follow the Commander's orders. You follow mine."

The nurse looks away, immediately obedient, and the General, without another word, turns on her heel and marches out.

We all look at each other anxiously and then, prodded by the soldiers, we follow the General, flanked by her equally obedient soldiers.

It's difficult to walk down the corridor. There are aches in muscles I never knew I had, and my bones seem to creak and grind as

I walk. Sharp pains race through my neck and spine, making me wince. Moreover, I'm absolutely famished. Yet I don't feel able to ask for food, worried that it may sway General Reece or the Commander, make them think that we're demanding or spoiled. If we want to survive, we need to give off the best impression we possibly can.

Ben keeps glancing at me with a worried expression, and I can see his anxiety, his fear that we might be expelled from Fort Noix and left to fend for ourselves all over again. I share his fear. I'm not sure any of us would survive that again. It's as if I'd been bracing myself all these years, steeling myself to survive this world, knowing that no other option existed. But now, seeing all this, seeing what is possible, the thought of going back to it is just too much.

We reach the end of the corridor, and as General Reece pushes open the two double doors, morning light floods in so bright I have to blink.

As my eyes adjust to the brightness, Fort Noix appears before me. It's a fully functioning town, filled with people and buildings, military trucks, bustle, noise, and laughter. *Laughter.* I can't even remember the last time I heard that. I can hardly believe my eyes.

It is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

The General's voice breaks through my reverie.

"This way."

We're led along a sidewalk, past groups of kids around Charlie and Bree's age playing in the streets.

"We don't have many children at Fort Noix," the General tells us. "The ones that are here are educated until the age of fourteen. Then we sort them according to their abilities and assign them work."

Bree looks at the children with longing eyes: the prospect of four years of school is beyond tempting for her. Nestled in her arms, Penelope immediately reads the change in Bree's emotion and licks her face.

"What kind of work?" Charlie asks, curiously.

"All forms of labor are needed to keep this fort operational. We have farmers, fishermen, hunters, builders, tailors, and then we have more administrative duties, like assigning rations, taking registers, and the like. We have professionals, too: teachers, soldiers, doctors, and nurses."

As we're led through the town, I find myself more and more impressed by what I see. Fort Noix runs on solar power. All the buildings are only one story high, so as not to be visible from afar or attract any attention. Most of them have grass on their roofs—something the General explains is for both insulation and camouflage—and tree branches covering them.

As we stroll along, the sunlight grows warmer and brighter, and

the General explains the history of the place. It seemed to come about through a combination of fate, chance, and a whole lot of luck. There were already a number of military bases peppered along the powerful Richelieu River. Due to its geographical location between New England and New France, the river had been a key pathway in the French and Iroquois Wars in the seventeenth century and, later, the French-English battles of the eighteenth century. Because of its rich military history, those who, like General Reece, opposed the brewing American civil war were drawn to it, and helped turn it into a safe zone for defectors.

The second bit of luck was that the river flowed from the distant Green Mountains bordering Vermont. When the war finally broke out in New York, the mountains sheltered the fort from the winds carrying nuclear radiation. While the rest of the population succumbed to the radiation and disease that resulted in the biovictims, the military personnel hiding out in Fort Noix were protected. At the same time, the good source of clean running water provided them with an abundance of fish, so that when supply routes were blockaded, bridges blown, and villages leveled, the people in the fort survived.

The wars that had raged around these parts had another unlikely outcome. Since most of the local towns were flattened, the surrounding forests had a chance to grow. Soon, a thick barrier of evergreens surrounded Fort Noix, reducing its chances of being found to virtually nil, while providing wood for fires and game for hunting.

Once the sound of bombs stopped and the fort's residents knew the war was over, they sent out scouts and quickly realized the human race had obliterated itself. After that, they cut themselves off completely and set to work expanding the fort into a town, and building civilization again from the ground up.

By the time General Reece has finished her story, I'm in awe of her. Her calm and military steeliness reminds me of my dad.

As we walk, I can't help but feel overwhelmed by every little detail. It's been so long since I've seen civilization. It's like stepping back in time. Better, even. It's like stepping into a dream come true. The people milling around me look healthy and well cared for. None of them have endured starvation. None of them have had to fight to the death. They're just normal people like the ones who used to populate the earth. The thought makes a lump form in my throat. Is it possible to start again?

I can tell the others are as overwhelmed as I am. Bree and Charlie stay close together, side by side, looking around with awe. They're both clearly excited and happy to be in Fort Noix, yet also anxious at the thought of it all potentially being taken away from us.

Ben, on the other hand, seems a little dazed. I can't blame him.

To step out of our brutal world and into this one is beyond disorienting. He walks slowly, almost as though in a trance, and his eyes glance furtively from side to side, trying to take everything in. I realize as he walks that it's more than just being overwhelmed. It is like how my body could only reveal to me how exhausted it was once I was safe. Ben's mind, I'm sure, is revealing to him just how much he's been through: the death of his brother, fighting in the arena, every near-death experience. I can almost see that his mind is preoccupied with thoughts as he sifts through his memories. I have seen people suffer from post-traumatic stress, and his face bears the same look as they'd had. I can't help but hope that his appearance doesn't hamper our chances of being accepted here.

Soon, we're off the main street and walking down some smaller, winding roads that lead through the forests. This time, it's Charlie who starts hanging back, trudging a little way behind the rest of us. I drop my pace and draw up beside him.

"What's wrong?"

He looks at me with terrified eyes.

"What if this is a trap?" he says under his breath. "What if they're taking us to another arena?"

His question makes me wonder whether I'm being too trusting. I think back to the man who stole our supplies when we were on the run from the slaverunners. I'd trusted him and I'd been wrong. But this time it's different. There's no way Logan would have directed us toward danger.

I put my arm around Charlie's shoulder.

"We're safe now," I explain. "You don't have to be scared anymore."

But as we go, the canopy thickens above us, blocking out the daylight and making dark shadows crowd in around us. Something about walking this long, dark path reminds me of the arenas, of walking those corridors knowing that a horrible, painful death was all that awaited me. I can feel my heart begin to hammer in my chest.

The sky gets darker and darker as we go. Bree must notice something is wrong, because she snuggles into me.

"You're sweating," she says.

"I am?"

I touch my brow and find that I've broken out in a cold sweat.

"Are you okay?" Bree adds.

But her voice sounds strange, distorted, like it's coming from far, far away.

Suddenly, there's a hand on my arm, and I scream as I see Rose's black, wizened hand latching onto my arm. I lash out, pushing her away, scratching at her hand with my fingernails.

Then all at once the panic is gone. I come back to the present and realize that it wasn't Rose's hand on me at all. It was Ben's. He's cradling it against his chest, and deep scratches run along it. He looks at me with an expression of pure anguish while Penelope yap-yap-yaps her distress. The soldiers around us politely avert their gazes.

I look down at Bree and Charlie, my heart hammering.

"I'm sorry," I stammer. "I thought… I just…"

But my words disappear.

"Maybe we should take you back to the hospital," Ben suggests in a soft, persuasive voice.

"I'm fine," I say, sternly, frowning at their worried expressions. "I thought I saw something is all. It's no big deal. Come on."

I stroll ahead, leading the pack, trying to gain back some sense of myself. I'm not the sort of person who crumbles in the face of adversity and I'm not about to become the sort who is haunted by the past.

Yet as I continue to walk, I'm not so sure I can leave the past behind.

We turn a bend, and I see it: the short, squat building that must contain the Commander's office. I brace myself, heart pounding, as we walk.

The outcome of this meeting, I know, will determine if we live or die.

CHAPTER THREE

The Commander's building is buzzing with life. Military personnel march quickly by, while others sit around conference tables looking at blueprints, discussing in loud, confident voices the benefits of building a new granary store or extending the wing of the hospital. It feels like a real unit, a team with a purpose, and it feels good.

And it makes me all the more nervous that we won't be allowed to stay.

As we pass along the corridors, I see a sprawling gymnasium, people training with weapons, firing bows and arrows, sparring and wrestling. There are even little kids being trained how to fight. The people of Fort Noix are clearly preparing themselves for any kind of eventuality.

Finally, we're led into the Commander's office. A charismatic man in his forties, he stands and greets us each cordially by name, clearly already having been briefed. Unlike the General, he doesn't have a Canadian accent; in fact, he surprises me with a strong South Carolina twang, which tells me he's one of the defectors from the American side of the opposition.

He turns to me last.

"And you must be Brooke Moore." He cups his hand around mine and shakes, and the warmth from his skin seeps into mine. "I must say I'm impressed by your experiences. General Reece has filled me in on all you've endured. I know it's been hard on you. We don't know much about the outside world. We keep to ourselves here. Slaverunners, arenas—that's a whole different world to what we're used to. What I've been told about you is really truly incredible. I'm humbled to meet you all."

Finally, he drops my hand.

"I'm amazed by what you've done here," I say to the Commander. "I've dreamt of a place like this ever since the war. But I never dared dream it was true."

Ben nods in agreement, while Bree and Charlie seem completely entranced by the Commander, both gazing at him with wide eyes.

"I understand," he says. "On some days it's hard for me to take in, too."

He takes a deep breath. Unlike General Reece, who is a bit on the bristly side, the Commander is warm and pleasant, which keeps me hopeful.

But now that the formalities are over, his tone changes, darkens. He gestures for us all to sit. We sit in our chairs, stiff-backed like kids in a principal's office. He looks us over as he speaks. I can feel that

he's judging each of us, summing us up.

"I have a very serious decision to make," he begins. "Regarding whether you can stay at Fort Noix."

I nod solemnly as my hands twist in my lap.

"We've taken in outsiders before," he continues, "particularly children, but we don't do so as a matter of course. We've been tricked in the past by kids your age."

"We're not working for anyone," I say, quickly. "We're not spies or anything like that."

He looks at me skeptically.

"Then tell me about the boat."

It takes me a moment to understand, and then I realize: when we'd been rescued, we'd been traveling in a stolen slaverunner vessel. I realize that they must think we're part of some kind of organization.

"We stole it," I reply. "We used it to escape from Arena Two."

The Commander regards me with suspicious eyes, like he doesn't believe that we could have escaped from an arena.

"Did anyone follow you?" he asks. "If you escaped an arena and stole a boat from slaverunners, surely they'd be pursuing you?"

I think back to the time on the island in the Hudson, of the relentless game of cat and mouse we played with the slaverunners. But we'd managed to get away.

"There aren't," I say, confidently. "You have my word."

He frowns.

"I need more than your word, Brooke," the Commander contests. "The entire town would be in danger if someone had followed you."

"The only proof I have is that I've been lying asleep in a hospital bed for days and no one's come yet."

The Commander narrows his eyes, but my words seem to sink in. He folds his hands on top of the table.

"I'd like to know, in that case, why we should take you in. Why should we house you? Feed you?"

"Because it's the right thing to do," I say. "How else will we rebuild our civilization? At some point we need to start taking care of each other again."

My words seem to anger him.

"This is not a hotel," he snaps. "There are no free meals here. Everyone chips in. If we let you stay you'll be expected to work. Fort Noix is only for people who can contribute. Only for the tough. There is a graveyard out there filled with those who couldn't hack it here. No one here rests on their laurels. Fort Noix is not just about surviving —we are training an army of survivors."

I can feel my fighting instinct kick in. I pull my hands into fists and thump them on the table. "We *can* contribute. We're not just weak

children looking for someone to take care of them. We've fought in arenas. We've killed men, animals, and monsters. We have rescued people, kids. We are good people. Strong people."

"People who are used to doing things their own way," he contests. "How can I expect you to alter to a life under military command? Rules keep us alive. Order is the only thing stopping us from perishing like the others. We have a hierarchy. A system. How will you hack being told what to do after so many years running wild?"

I take a deep breath.

"Our father was in the military," I say. "Bree and I know exactly what it's like."

He pauses, then eyes me with dark, beady eyes.

"Your father was in the military?"

"Yes," I reply sternly, a little out of breath from my outpouring of anger.

The Commander frowns, then shuffles some papers on his desk as though looking for something. I see that it's a list of our names. He taps mine over and over with his fingertip then looks up and frowns.

"Moore," he says, saying my surname. Then he lights up.

"He's not Laurence Moore?"

At the sound of my father's name, my heart seems to stop beating entirely.

"Yes," Bree and I cry at the same time.

"Do you know him?" I add, my voice sounding desperate and frantic.

He leans back and now looks at us with a whole new respect, as if meeting us for the first time.

"I know of him," he says, nodding with clear surprise.

Hearing his tone of respect as he talks about my father makes me feel a surge of pride. It's no surprise to me that people looked up to him.

I realize then that the Commander's mood is shifting. Coming face to face with the orphaned children of an old acquaintance must have stirred some kind of sympathy inside of him.

"You can all stay," he says.

I clasp Bree's hand with relief and let out the breath I'd been holding. Ben and Charlie audibly sigh their relief. But before we even have a chance to smile at one another, the Commander says something else, something that makes my heart clench.

"But the dog has to go."

Bree gasps.

"No!" she cries.

She wraps her arms more tightly around Penelope. Sensing she's

become the subject of attention, the little Chihuahua wriggles in Bree's arms.

"No one stays at Fort Noix who cannot contribute," the Commander says. "That goes for animals as well. We have guard dogs, sheep dogs, and horses on the farms, but your little pet is useless to us. She absolutely cannot stay."

Bree dissolves into tears.

"Penelope isn't just a pet. She's the smartest animal in the world. She saved our life!"

I put my arm around Bree and pull her close into my side.

"Please," I say to the Commander, impassioned. "We're so grateful to you for letting us stay, but don't make us give up Penelope. We've already lost so much. Our home. Our parents. Our friends. Please don't make us give up our dog too."

Charlie looks at the Commander with concern in his eyes. He's trying to read the situation, to work out whether this is going to escalate into a fight like it always did back in the holding cells of Arena 2.

Finally, the Commander sighs.

"It can stay," he relents. "For now."

Bree turns her tear-stained eyes up to him. "She can?"

The Commander nods stiffly.

"Thank you," she whispers, gratefully.

Though the Commander's face remains emotionless, I can tell he's moved by our plight.

"Now," he says quickly, standing, "General Reece will assign you quarters and take you to them."

We all stand too. The Commander clamps a hand down on Bree's shoulder and begins steering her to the door. Then all at once we're shoved out into the corridor.

We stand there, shell-shocked, hardly comprehending what just happened.

"We got in," I state, blinking.

Ben nods, looking equally taken aback. "Yes. We did."

"This is home now?" Bree asks.

I squeeze her close into me. "It's home."

* * *

We follow General Reece outside past rows of small brick buildings, one story high, covered in branches to camouflage them.

"Males and females are separated," the General explains. "Ben, Charlie, you'll be staying here." She points at one of the brick

buildings covered in thick ivy. “Brooke, Bree, you’ll be across the street.”

Ben frowns. “Don’t people live with their families?”

The General stiffens a little. “None of us have families,” she says, a hint of emotion in her voice for the first time. “When you desert the military, you don’t get a chance to bring your husband, kids, or parents with you.”

I feel a pang of sympathy in my gut. My dad wasn’t the only person who deserted his family for a cause he believed in. And I wasn’t the only person to abandon their mother.

“But hasn’t anyone formed a family since?” Ben asks, pressing her further, as though oblivious to her emotional pain. “I thought you said you began repopulating.”

“There are no families at the moment. Not yet, anyway. The community has to be controlled and stabilized to ensure we have enough food, space, and resources. We can’t have people breeding whenever they want to. It must be regulated.”

“*Breeding?*” Ben says under his breath. “That’s a funny way of putting it.”

The General purses her lips. “I understand that you have questions about how things work here, and I appreciate it may seem unusual to you from the outside. But Fort Noix has survived because of the rules we’ve put in place, because of our order. Our citizens understand and respect that.”

“And so do we,” I add, quickly. I turn and put an arm around my sister. “Come on, Bree, let’s get inside. I’m looking forward to meeting our new housemates.”

The General nods. “They’ll show you the ropes from here on out. Follow them to lunch when it’s time.”

She gives us a salute, then walks away, taking her soldiers with her.

* * *

A cheerful American woman named Neena shows us around our new home. She’s the “mother” of the house, which consists, she tells us, of a group of teenage girls and young women. She explains that the rest of our housemates are out working and that we’ll meet them in the evening.

“Give you time to settle in,” she says, smiling kindly. “A house full of twenty women can get a little much at times.”

She shows us into a small, simple room with bunk beds.

“You two will need to share a room,” she says. “It’s not exactly a

five-star resort."

I smile.

"It's perfect," I say, walking into the room.

Once again, I'm overwhelmed by the sensation of peace and safety. I can't remember the last time I stood in a room that smelled clean, that had been dusted and polished and vacuumed. Light streams through the window, making the room look even more welcoming.

For the first time in a long time, I feel safe.

Penelope likes it, too. She runs around happily in circles, jumping on the beds, wagging her tail and barking.

"I must say it's so exciting to have a dog in the house," Neena says. "The other girls are just going to love her."

Bree grins from ear to ear, every inch the proud owner.

"She's so smart for a dog," she says. "She saved our life once, when—"

I grab Bree's arm and squeeze it to quiet her. For some reason, I don't want what we've been through spoken about within our new home. I want it to be a new beginning for us, one free from the past. More than anything, I don't want anyone to know about the arenas if they don't have to. I've killed people. It will change the way they look at me, make them more cautious, and I don't know if I can cope with that right now.

Bree seems to understand what I'm trying to silently communicate. She lets her story disappear into the ether, and Neena doesn't seem to notice.

"There are things for you on the bed," she says. "Not much, just a few bits to tide you over."

On each of our beds are neatly folded clothes. They're made from the same dark material that General Reece and her army were wearing. The fabric is rough; I figure it must be home-grown cotton, colored by naturally made dyes and stitched into a uniform by the tailors she'd told us about.

"Do you girls want to wash before lunch?" Neena asks.

I nod and Neena takes me to the small bathroom that serves all twenty of the house's residents, before leaving me be. It's basic and the water is cold, but it feels amazing to be clean again.

When Bree comes back into our room after her own shower, she starts laughing.

"You look funny," she says to me.

I've changed into the stiff uniform that was left for me. Tendrils of hair hang over my shoulders, making wet patches in the fabric.

"It's itchy," I say, wriggling uncomfortably.

"Clean, though," Bree replies, running her fingertips against the

fabric of her own uniform. “And *new*.”

I know what she means. It’s been years since we had anything that was *ours*, that wasn’t stolen or found or recycled. These are our clothes, never before worn. For the first time in a long time, we have possessions.

Along with the new clothes, we are also given towels, shoes, nightwear, a pencil, a pad of paper, a watch, a flashlight, a whistle, and a penknife. It’s like a little welcome package. From what I’ve learned about the place so far, the contents seem very Fort Noix.

Neena leads us out of the house and along the street, and after a short stroll we come to a larger building. I look up. It has the air of a town hall, yet simple, anonymous.

We go inside and immediately the smell of food hits me. I start to salivate, while Bree’s eyes widen. The room is filled with tables, most taken up by farm workers, recognizable from their muddy clothes and sun-blushed skin.

“There’s Ben and Charlie,” Bree says, pointing to a table.

I notice that both of them have plates piled high with food, and both are gorging themselves.

Neena must notice the look of want on my face because she smiles and says, “Go sit with them. I’ll bring you over some food.”

We thank her and go to sit with Charlie and Ben on a bench filled with farm workers. Everyone nods politely to us as we take seats. For a community that doesn’t usually take in outsiders, they seem pretty accepting about the sudden appearance of four bedraggled, half-starved kids and a one-eyed Chihuahua.

“Someone’s feeling more at home,” I say to Ben as he rams another mouthful of food into his mouth.

But that same haunted look has returned to his eyes. He may be clean on the outside, but his mind appears to be polluted by the things he’s been through. And though he’s eating, he’s doing so mechanically. Not in the same way Charlie does, as though he’s relishing every single bite. Ben eats as though he can’t even taste the food. What’s more, he doesn’t say a word as we take our places beside him, almost as though he hasn’t noticed we’re there. I can’t help but worry for him. I’ve heard about people going through terrible ordeals only to then fall apart as soon as they reach safety. I pray that Ben won’t be one of them.

I’m distracted when Neena returns with two plates of food, one for Bree and one for me, heaped with garlic-buttered chicken with roast potatoes and some kind of spicy zucchini and tomato side dish. I can’t remember the last time I saw food that looked like this. It looks like something you could order in a restaurant.

I can’t hold myself back. I begin wolfing it down, making my taste

buds come to life. It's absolutely delicious. For so many years I subsisted on the plainest of foods, the tiniest of portions, and trained myself not to want more. Now, finally, I can let myself go.

Bree is a little more restrained. She gives a generous portion of chicken to Penelope before seeing to herself. I feel a little embarrassed by the way I devour my food as if my life depends on it, but table manners aren't exactly my priority right now.

Down the table, across from us, I can't help noticing a boy who looks a little older than me, feeding strips of meat to a pit bull terrier. The boy looks exactly like the type who'd own a pit bull. His head is shaved, and he has dark eyebrows, brooding eyes, and a cocky smile.

"Who's this?" he asks Bree, nodding at the Chihuahua.

"Penelope," she says. "And yours?"

"Jack," the boy says, rubbing the dog's neck playfully.

"I thought animals weren't allowed here," I say.

His eyes meet mine, smoldering, intense.

"He's a guard dog," he replies. Then he looks at Bree. "Do you reckon Penelope and Jack might want to be friends?"

Bree laughs. "Maybe."

They both set their dogs down on the ground. Straightaway the two begin to play, chasing each other and gently pawing at each other's face.

Then, to my surprise, Jack bounds right over to me, leaps into my lap, and plants a big, slobbery, hot lick across my face.

The others laugh, while I can't help laughing myself.

"I think he likes Brooke more than Penelope," Bree says with a grin.

"I think you might be right," the boy replies, fixing his gaze on me.

I finally manage to shove Jack off me, and as I wipe his drool from my cheek with my sleeve, the boy watches on, seemingly amused. He breaks apart a piece of bread with his strong fingers, and taps one edge into the juices on his plate.

"So," he says before taking a bite, "I'm guessing Brooke is your sister."

"Yes," Bree says. "And I'm Bree."

Even though his mouth is full, he says, "Ryan," and slides down the bench and stretches his hand out and shakes Bree's.

Then he offers it to me. I look up. His dark eyes bore into me, making a pit swirl in my stomach. The sensation reminds me of the first time I saw Logan: not the warm, slow-building feeling I got with Ben, but an instant, heart-stopping attraction. I don't want to touch him, worried that I'll somehow betray my attraction.

Immediately, I feel guilty for having any kind of attraction to him

at all. It's only been a couple of hours since my dream about Logan. I still miss him.

I look at Ryan's outstretched hand suspiciously. I have no choice. He's not going to just put it down. I grasp it, hoping I can get the shaking over quickly. I turn my gaze back down to my meal, hoping he doesn't notice the blush in my cheeks.

Ryan's gaze stays on me as I eat. I can just about see his crooked smile from the corner of my eye. He's looking at me so intensely my heart begins to flutter.

"Your sister has a healthy appetite," he says, speaking to Bree but looking at me the whole time. "And butter on her chin."

Bree laughs but I feel self-conscious, my blush deepening.

"I was just joking," Ryan says. "No need to look so angry."

"I'm not angry," I reply sharply. "Just trying to eat in peace."

Ryan tips his head back and laughs; I'd been trying to get him off my back, but it seems as though my words have only encouraged him. His dark eyes twinkle.

"So *you're* the one from the arena," he says.

I swallow hard. "Who told you?"

Then I notice Charlie looking guilty beside me. He must have already spilled the beans about our ordeal. So much for a fresh start.

I don't say anything.

"I'm not judging you," Ryan says. "Actually, I'm impressed."

At these words, Ben looks over. He'd been in his own world this whole time, seemingly lost in his own thoughts, but now he's suddenly alert, a flash of jealousy in his eyes as he looks over at us.

"Have you just come back from the fields like the others?" I ask Ryan, trying to steer the conversation toward safe territory.

Ryan smiles to himself, as though pleased to finally have my attention. "Actually, I've been on guard duty this morning."

"Really?" I ask, genuinely interested. "How does that work?"

Ryan stretches out in his chair, making himself comfortable, as he begins his explanation.

"A group patrols the outer borders at all times, while a second group patrols inside, making sure everyone's keeping to the rules. And to make sure no one gets too power crazy, we take it in turns, in a rotation. Everyone has to do it, even the kids. I mean, you won't have to do it for a while since you're recuperating, but—"

"I want to," I say suddenly, interrupting him.

The idea of sitting around doing nothing fills me with horror. If I sit around idle, my mind might start playing tricks on me again. I'll see Rose and Flo. I'll see Logan. I don't know if my heavy heart could cope with seeing him again.

"Well, you will eventually—" Ryan begins.

“Now,” I say, firmly. “Can I come on your shift with you?”

Ryan gives me a curious look, and I can see his eyes are filled with intrigue and respect.

“I’ll see if General Reece is okay with me having a tagalong.”

“Make that two,” Ben says suddenly.

I look over at Ben, and for the first time since we got here, he seems to be fully lucid.

“You sure you’re up for it?” I ask.

He nods, sternly. “If you think you’re well enough to patrol, then I definitely am.”

Ryan nods, looking equally as impressed by Ben as he did by me. But I’m not entirely convinced Ben is well enough to come. He looks haggard, his eyes rimmed with dark shadows, and I can’t help but suspect that he only wants to come along because he doesn’t want to leave me alone with Ryan.

And it’s then that I wonder: what have I just gotten myself into?

CHAPTER FOUR

Ryan leads Ben and me across the length of Fort Noix, heading for the arsenal, and as we go, I feel satiated for the first time in months. My stomach is almost uncomfortably heavy. It feels good. It also feels good to be heading to guard duty, to have a mission, a purpose, and something to take my mind off everything. Without it, I think I might go crazy.

We pass plenty of people, all as clean and well fed as Ryan is; none have radiation scars or melted flesh from nuclear fallout. None are missing limbs or teeth or dragging a deformed leg behind them as they walk. I haven't seen so many healthy-looking humans in one place since before the war. It's almost disconcerting.

Ryan walks beside me but Ben lingers a few steps behind. There's an undeniably tense atmosphere, one I attempt to ignore by focusing all my attention on Jack the pit bull, who has been tagging closely at my heels as if I'm his master rather than Ryan.

"He's taken a shine to you," Ryan says with a chuckle.

Ben's head immediately snaps up. He frowns. I can't help but wonder why Ben insisted on coming with us. I don't want him lingering around me like a dark storm cloud, casting suspicious glances in my direction. We're on the same team, we always have been, and I don't like seeing him like this. It reminds me too much of the way he acted with Logan; jealous, wanting more from me than I am able to give.

At least Ryan doesn't seem to pick up on the tension. He strolls confidently across the compound, like someone who has never seen real death or destruction. Not like Ben and me, whose very steps seem to reveal our past torments.

"Here we go," Ryan says with an air of pride as he hauls open a huge steel door.

A cloud of dust swirls into the air, obscuring my vision. As it settles, I get my first glimpse of the treasures inside the arsenal. My mouth drops open as I step inside and take in the sight of pistols and sniper rifles, automatic crossbows and AK47s. I feel like a kid in a candy shop.

As I scan the walls, something catches my eye. A shotgun. It reminds me of the antique one Dad used to have displayed behind glass at home. I go over to it and pick it up.

"Are you sure you want to take that thing?" Ryan asks, as I test the weight of it in my hands. "Something smaller would be better for your stature."

In a matter of seconds, I lock and load the shotgun, before

hitching it on my shoulder in firing position. I go through the motions expertly; thanks to Dad, I'm at ease with a shotgun.

"I think this one will suit me just fine," I say.

Ryan's eyes widen with surprise. He seems impressed by my knowledge of the weapons and I can't help but feel a surge of pride.

Ben narrows his eyes and grabs his own weapon, a rifle.

"So you guys have used guns before?" Ryan asks.

"Of course," Ben replies, a little too harshly.

I think back to the first time I met Ben, when we were speeding through the frozen wastelands chasing after the slaverunners who had kidnapped our siblings. He'd been useless with the gun, and had even dropped it at one point.

"Ben's more of a bow and arrow kind of guy," I say, gently mocking him, trying to coax him into the conversation.

Ben frowns, clearly not taking the joke well. Ben's always been sensitive, but he's clearly feeling more sensitive than usual. I remind myself to be more careful with him. I don't want him to think I'm making a joke at his expense or that I'm letting Ryan's jovial attitude rub off on me.

"No problem," Ryan says. "We have plenty of bows and arrows if you'd prefer."

"I'm fine with this," Ben answers tersely.

Ryan shrugs, once again seemingly oblivious to the building tension in the air.

I then notice a wall display of knives. I go over and see the same kind of knife my dad had when I was a kid, with a military insignia brandished into the handle. A wave of nostalgia washes over me.

I touch my fingertips to the cool metal blade. "Can I take this too?"

"Of course," Ryan replies, suddenly coming up very closely behind me. "Take what you want."

I can feel the warmth radiating from his body as I snatch up the knife, holding the weight of it in my hand. It feels like mine, like it was always supposed to be in my grasp. Then I dart out of Ryan's shadow, stashing the knife at my hip as I go. I load up with the gun on one shoulder, and a bow and arrow slung across my back.

Ryan whistles as he takes in the sight of me.

"Ready for duty," he says, giving me a light-hearted salute.

I can't help but smile to myself. I feel every inch a guard and I'm practically itching to get out there, to learn the ropes and prove to the Commander that I deserve my place here.

Ben, on the other hand, is fumbling around and getting frustrated with a twisted strap. Ryan goes over to help him. As he tightens his straps, I can't help but think that Ben looks like a lost, vulnerable

child being dressed by his parent on their first day at school.

We head out of the arsenal and my stomach swirls with anticipation as I catch sight of the group of ten other guards up ahead that we'll be patrolling with. They've congregated by one of the huge iron barbed-wire-topped gates. A few dogs mill around, pawing tufts of grass at the base of the fence, sniffing the air, cocking their heads at every noise. It occurs to me that they've all been trained to help with patrolling and to offer protection against attacks. The Commander was right when he said everyone at Fort Noix has a job to do—even the animals. I'm grateful again that he conceded to keep Penelope, and I hope she gets a chance to prove that despite being the size of a cat and having only one eye, she's the smartest dog he'll ever meet.

Jack breaks away from us and rushes up to the other dogs, barking excitedly. His presence alerts the group to our approach. Heads begin to turn in our direction, taking in the sight of Ryan leading two strangers toward them. I can't help but feel like I'm being scrutinized, sized up, and I try to calm my racing heart. After all, this is nothing compared to the leering eyes of the biovictim spectators in the arenas.

Ben doesn't seem to be faring as well as me, though. As we get closer to the group, I can see his face becoming paler. He's not ready for this at all. Being with strangers, packing weaponry—it's all too much for him, like being back in an arena. I don't get a chance to tell him to turn around and go home, though, because we're suddenly at the entrance. Ryan's clapping people on the back, reeling out names that fly in one ear and out the other. The only one that sticks is Molly, because the girl it belongs to has shockingly ginger hair.

She looks over at me.

"You're living with Neena, right?" she asks with a friendly grin. She looks about my age, with bright green eyes and freckles across her nose.

I nod, a little overwhelmed by all the names and faces.

"Me too," she replies. "I guess that makes us roomies."

Roomies. The word seems alien to me, like it's a term that belonged to an old, ancient world that I thought had ceased to exist. Not for the first time since arriving here, a wave of happiness washes over me. I have a feeling she might become a friend. *Friend*. A word I had never thought to use again.

The group begins to move and we follow, sticking close to Ryan and Molly. We pass through several layers of fencing, guards stationed at the gates of each one. The amount of security they have here is crazy, but I understand their need to be so heavy-handed. The only way to keep the people inside Fort Noix safe is by making it impenetrable to all the monsters lurking outside.

Between one row of fencing and the next, nestled in the trees, I see a row of wooden cabins.

"Do you guys stay in those overnight?" I ask Molly.

She shakes her head. "No, people live in them."

"Really?"

Before Molly has a chance to reply, Ryan speaks up, practically salivating at the opportunity to impart his wisdom.

"We call them the Forest Dwellers," he says. "They're sort of a part of Fort Noix but not at the same time."

"Why?" I ask.

"Well, not everyone wants to live by military command. They want to structure their lives differently. They want to have families, homes, pets, that sort of thing. You know, the whole men and women being separated thing isn't so great for that." He smiles and wiggles a knowing eyebrow. I blush and avert my gaze as he continues. "Anyway, they've all taken the pledge to keep the fort secret, so they're pretty much a part of us really, especially as they are within our perimeter. They're just not on the same job rotation system—and they don't get rations."

Just then I notice a barefoot young girl sitting on the wooden doorstep of one of the cabins. In her lap sits a huge rabbit with light brown fluffy fur, which she strokes gently. As we pass, she looks up and waves. I wave back. She must take it as an invitation to come over, because she places the rabbit on the ground, leaps to her feet, and bounds over. Her patchwork dress swishes as she skips toward us, and her blond ponytail bobs.

"Oh, here we go," Molly says under her breath while rolling her eyes, giving me the distinct impression that she's not much of a maternal type.

"Trixie," Ryan says in a gentle warning tone as she draws up beside him. "You know you can't come on patrols with us. It's far too dangerous."

"I just wanted to say hello to the new people," the little girl says breezily.

She's absolutely adorable. I can hardly believe that such a smiley, carefree child can exist in our brutal world.

"I'm Brooke," I say to Trixie. "And this is Ben."

I look around for my companion, realizing he'd been so quiet I'd completely forgotten about him. The whole time that I've been chatting with Molly and Ryan he's been silent, just taking it all in. As I look at him now, I can see how distracted he seems, looking over his shoulder, flinching at every noise. My worry for him magnifies.

"Do you want to come to my house to play?" Trixie says to me, breaking through my thoughts.

Her sweetness and innocence warms my heart. She can't have seen any of the atrocities of the war, or have the constant terror of being kidnapped by slaverunners at the back of her mind. She's carefree, just as a child ought to be.

"I'd love to," I say, "but I'm on guard duty. It's my job to protect you."

Trixie beams up at me. "Well then maybe another day," she says. "My mom will make you soup if you like. Dad made a Scrabble board out of wood. Do you like Scrabble? My sister's better than me at it but it's still my favorite game."

The thought of hanging out with a family playing games and eating soup seems like a dream come true.

"That sounds like a lot of fun," I reply, feeling a strange pang in my stomach as I realize that I haven't played a game since before the war, that my childhood, and the lives of many, many others, was cut short by all the fighting. "Maybe I'll be able to come back and see you," I finish.

This seems to placate Trixie. She trots off back to her home, although not before stroking each one of the guard dogs.

"She's so cute," I say to Ryan as I watch her skip away. "I can't believe she lives out here with her family. She seems so carefree."

"She is," Ryan replies. "That's part of our job. We're not just protecting the fort, we're protecting everyone we can."

A strong wave of happiness washes through me, telling me I'm exactly where I need to be.

Finally we pass through the perimeter fence and head farther into the woods. It's colder out in the open and the ground beneath my boots is frozen, crunching underfoot. The new boots Neena gave me prevent any of the cold seeping in like my old, worn leather ones used to. The strange uniform is pretty good at keeping out the cold too.

"So, where is it that you guys are from?" Molly asks Ben and me, sounding genuinely interested.

She has a soft Canadian accent, which invites me in and tells me I can trust her. But I'm reticent to tell her about the arenas and everything we've been through. The thought of making a friend, a real friend, is so tempting. I don't want to scare her off by revealing my gladiatorial past. No one wants to make friends with a killer.

"The Catskills," I reply. "New York."

Her eyebrows rise with interest. "New York? How did you end up in Quebec?"

Logan. That's the real answer. He always believed in this place and urged us to come here. But I can't tell Molly that. I can't even let his name pass my lips.

"There was a rumor about Fort Noix, about survivors," I say. "We

thought we'd risk it."

Ben looks at me inquisitively, silently noting my inability to utter the name of our dead companion.

This time, Molly's eyes widen. "You'd better not tell the Commander that there are rumors about this place. He's terrified about anyone finding out about us. I mean you guys are the first outsiders we've welcomed in a long, long time. He seems to think the whole fort will implode if anyone finds out about our existence."

"He's right to think that," Ben says, a little too abruptly. "You'd all be in danger if the slaverunners found out about this place."

Molly gives him curious look, one that seems to suggest that she's seen through him, into his soul, and has glimpsed the darkness inside. But she doesn't challenge him, and I'm grateful.

The outpost is a little ways away from Trixie's cabin. It's a tall metal structure that stretches far up into the canopy. The climb is at least thirty feet. Molly enthusiastically begins to scale the ladder, showing off her strength. But I falter. Because as I stand at the base of it, I get a sudden flash of memory of the horrible sand dune we had to climb in Arena 2.

"You need help climbing up?" Ryan asks.

I shake my head, dislodging the memory, then grip the rungs. I'm determined not to be weak, not to let the things I've been through in the past affect me now. I take a breath to steel myself and begin to climb, Ryan following right behind. My muscles protest but I push through my pain, and after a few moments I'm at the top.

The effort was worth it. Up here at the top, there's an amazing view all around. The mountains look beautiful, with their snow-capped peaks glittering in the midday sunlight. I let the air stir the hair at the base of my neck, cooling the sweat from the effort of climbing. I completely tune out the sound of the rest of the guards clambering into the outpost, and revel in the tranquility of the moment.

Far in the distance, I can see huge craters in the earth where the bombs hit. It makes me so sad to think of all of the needless destruction, all the death and pain, and I wonder if our world really ever can recover. But then I realize that the craters are overgrown with vegetation, as though nature is trying to eradicate the disastrous effects our war has had, trying to heal the scars and gashes our bombs created. The sight gives me hope for a better future. All at once, a smile bursts across my face.

From the corner of my eye, I can see Ryan watching me intently. I squirm under his scrutiny and let my smile fade. For some reason, I don't want him encroaching on my private moment. When he approaches I don't look at him, keeping my gaze steadily ahead.

“I don’t think your friend is enjoying the view as much as you are,” his voice quips into my ear.

I look behind and see Ben, his gun huddled in his arms, looking overwhelmed.

“It’s the height,” I say, knowing exactly why Ben is freaking out, knowing he must have had the same horrible flash of memory as I had. “We had to climb up a mountain in one of the arenas. It was full of spikes that bludgeoned kids to death.”

I shut my mouth immediately. I don’t know what came over me, what made me blab about such a painful secret from my past to Ryan like that.

“Oh,” he says, his mocking smile immediately disappearing. He looks suddenly serious for the first time since I’ve met him. “Sorry, I didn’t realize.”

A feeling of intense awkwardness overcomes me.

“You couldn’t have known,” I reply quickly, trying to end the conversation.

On the other side of the post, Molly takes a seat beside another guard and pulls out a pack of cards. I’m shocked and a little taken aback to see her, and the other guards around her, looking so lax. No one seems to be alert at all. The Commander made it seem as though everyone at Fort Noix was as serious and militaristic as he is, but here are his guards lazing around.

“Don’t worry,” Ryan says, clocking my expression. “Nothing ever happens on guard duty. There were attacks at the beginning but these days it’s calmed down a lot.”

But it’s not enough to placate me. Everyone back at the fort is relying on these guys to do their job and here they all are sitting around like it’s a big game. Even the guard dogs are slacking off, play fighting with one another rather than looking out for intruders. So much for everyone has a job to do! Only Ben and I seem to be alert to the possibility of lurking danger.

Just as those thoughts are crossing my mind, I notice movement coming from the distance. In the area pocked with bomb craters there’s a patch of trees and shrubbery, and it seems to be rustling.

“Do people live over there?” I say, nudging Ryan.

He peers out where I’m pointing.

“In the bomb craters?” he says. “No way. The radiation levels are too high.”

Every muscle in my body tenses. “There’s someone there,” I say.

I bring up my shotgun. The motion alerts Ben. He comes to my side, poised with his rifle.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Ryan cries. “You guys are getting a bit trigger happy. I’m sure you’re seeing things. It’s probably just a deer.”

Molly notices the commotion and comes to my side.

"What's going on, Brooke?" she asks, her expression serious and intent.

"There are people in the trees," I say, not looking at her, my body still positioned to fire, my eyes still locked on the foliage, seeking out possible danger.

Unlike Ryan, Molly doesn't contest me. She seems to have understood me straightaway. She raises her own gun, taking position beside me.

The trees continue to rustle. Then all at once, something huge and black billows from the foliage. I let off a shot, the noise splintering the air. It's only after I've fired that I realize my evil predator was a flock of innocent birds.

The tenseness leaves my body in one go, replaced by embarrassment. Molly gives me a sheepish look, as if she's embarrassed on my behalf by my overreaction. Ryan just grins, amused by the whole thing.

"Told you there was nothing to worry about," he says, arrogantly.

But no sooner are the words out of his mouth, than the sounds of screaming and frantic barking come from behind.

I spin and my heart drops as I see that, just on the other side of the outpost, near the ladder leading up, a group of crazies are thundering out of the vegetation. They're heading right for us.

Ryan's slow to react. "Breach!" he finally shouts.

Immediately, I fire my gun at them, but my angle is off and I miss my target. The guards seem stunned, like they were never expecting such a thing to happen. They take far too long to react. By the time they join me, I've finally managed to hit one of the crazies, and he goes down like a dead weight.

At last, guns begin firing off all over the place. The noise is so loud I wince. The air becomes thick with smoke from the shots we're firing and the smell of sulfur.

The crazies start to drop, but some are getting dangerously close to our outpost. I adjust my position and begin firing as they ascend. Ben stands beside me but I realize he isn't firing his gun at all. His hands are trembling and sweat is pouring down his face. He's as white as a ghost.

"Ben!" I cry. "Help me!"

But he's completely frozen. It's Ryan who sidles up to me and helps me take down the group, one by one, while Molly flanks my other side, firing expertly, too.

Suddenly, I hear a shrill scream from behind and swirl on the spot. One of the crazies must have taken a different route than the others and has gotten up the outpost without anyone noticing. It

dawns on me that not a single one of the guards thought to cover us from behind, leaving us completely exposed.

The crazy's arm is locked around Molly's throat and he's dragging her back toward the ladder. I watch, horrified, as Jack bounds forward and locks his jaws around the crazy's leg. The man roars in pain and loosens his grip on Molly, leaving just enough for her to run away. But now Jack's the source of his hatred. He grabs the pit bull and yanks him off, bringing him over his head, ready to hurl him off the outpost. The whole world seems to slow down as I notice the terrified dog's expression as he hangs helplessly over the edge of the outpost. The thirty-foot drop will certainly kill him.

Without even thinking, I pull my knife from its sheath and race across the length of the outpost. With every ounce of strength in my body, I stab the crazy straight in the heart.

The crazy's eyes roll back in his head and he falls backward. I manage to wrench Jack from his grasp before the crazy plummets over the side of the outpost and hits the ground with a sickening squelch.

My blood-soaked knife clatters to the floor, and then, all at once, quiet descends. I stand there panting, Jack whimpering in my arms, the warm blood of the crazy dripping down my face. Slowly, I turn back to face the other guards.

They're all looking at me in disbelief, as though they can hardly comprehend what I just did. I can't tell if they're scared of me or in awe of me, but the main thing is that my secret life as a killer can no longer be hidden.

I cradle Jack in my arms then slowly approach Ryan. I place the dog in his arms. His cocky expression has completely gone. His arrogance seems to have faded, too, leaving behind a stunned and slightly alarmed expression.

"Thank you," he says, quietly. But I think what he really means is, "I get it now." For the first time he understands what sort of world we really live in, and what sort of person it has made me.

Everyone else seems too stunned to move. I feel I have no choice but to take control of the situation.

"We should report back to the Commander," I say, trying to hide the tremor in my voice. "That attack wasn't accidental. It was planned. That means there might be more to come."

CHAPTER FIVE

Twilight is breaking by the time we make it back to the fort. Up ahead I see a group of guards who must have returned from guard duty before us sitting around a bonfire, chatting away without a care in the world. They begin whispering when they notice us trudging wearily toward them.

A tall, lanky man with a goatee comes up to us.

"What happened to you lot?" he says, smirking.

"A breach," Molly explains.

Immediately, the man's expression changes. "What do you mean?"

"We were attacked," Ryan adds. "By a group of crazies."

The rest of the group begins to take notice of the conversation. They stand up from their positions around the bonfire and come over, listening intently, looks of concern on their faces.

"Did anyone get hurt?" the man with the goatee asks.

Ryan shakes his head. "Thankfully not. But if it hadn't been for Brooke, there might have been fatalities."

I shift uncomfortably as everyone's attention turns to me, the stranger, taking in the sight of my blood-splattered uniform. But rather than looking scared of me like the others who'd seen me kill the crazy at the outpost, they look at me with respect. People start congratulating me, clapping me on the shoulder. Zeke, the man with the goatee, salutes me.

I can't believe it. I'd been so worried about people finding out about me being a killer and judging me for it, it's quite a relief for it all to be out in the open. I can't remember the last time I felt accepted like this.

"Someone get this girl a drink!" Zeke says, before adding, "We don't have liquor, I'm afraid, so I hope you like mint tea."

"That sounds great," I say, but I'm still in fight-or-flight mode. "But we should report to the Commander."

Zeke shakes his head and rests a hand on my arm. "Don't. It will just make him more paranoid."

"But…" I begin, but he interrupts me.

"Honestly," he says, passing me a mint tea. "The Commander is becoming more and more isolated. We take in fewer survivors every year. To be honest, I'm surprised he even let you guys stay. We've kicked kids out younger than you before. If he knows the attack came so soon after you arrived, he'll probably blame it on you, saying you led them here. So if I were you, I wouldn't give him more reasons to turn people away."

The heat from the tea seeps into my skin as his words seep into my mind. It hadn't occurred to me that not everyone within Fort Noix would be on board with the way the Commander chooses to run things. But, like the Forest Dwellers I saw earlier, it seems as though not everyone is happy with how things work here, with the Commander's stance on not taking in outsiders. My gut instinct back when I'd met him in his office earlier this morning had been revulsion —to not take in outsiders is the equivalent of sentencing them to death. But then I'd gotten so caught up in it all, in being a guard, in protecting this precious place, that I'd let myself forget how cruel that policy really is.

Just then, I hear a voice calling me from far away.

"Brooke!"

It's Bree. I turn and see her running along the path toward me, Charlie just a few steps behind. Neena walks a little way behind them both with Penelope on a lead. Some of the girls and women from our house are walking beside her, and the boys from Ben's house are also coming toward the bonfire.

Bree reaches me, flies into my arms, and hugs me tightly. I hold her close.

"What happened?" she cries, moving out of the embrace. "You were gone for hours. I was worried."

I smile at her reassuringly. "I'm OK."

"Is Jack okay?" Bree asks, bending down to stroke the pit bull at Ryan's feet.

"He's fine," Ryan says to Bree, but his eyes are locked on me. "Thanks to Brooke."

Over Bree's crouched figure, Ryan's smoldering eyes burn into me. Before, I wasn't sure what he thought about me, but now I do. He admires me. My stomach flutters at the thought.

"Where's Ben?" Charlie asks.

Immediately, I feel guilty for letting myself feel anything toward Ryan at all. I glance around, searching for Ben. I see him sitting on a bench, alone, beside the fire. He looks just as lost back at the fort as he did out in the forest.

"There he is," I say to Charlie. "Why don't you go and get him some tea?"

"I'll get it," Ryan says, his intense gaze still fixed on me.

I falter. "Okay… thanks."

I watch, my stomach roiling, as he disappears into the crowd.

Bree grabs my hand and drags me toward the bonfire. Charlie follows, and the three of us sit down beside Ben. Despite the danger we've just been in, we're all still overjoyed to be at Fort Noix. To be warm, clothed, and cared for. To be amongst allies. But Zeke has

planted a seed of doubt in my mind. Is it enough for just *us* to be warm, clothed, and cared for? Is it okay to sit on our laurels when others like us die out in the wilderness at the hands of slaverunners, biovictims, and crazies?

Ryan comes back with more mint tea and some chicken soup for us all.

"Do you want to join us?" I ask him.

I want to speak to him about the Commander's isolationist position, about his hard-line policy on not letting in survivors. But Ryan casts his eyes over at Ben, and I look over to see that Ben's watching us, his expression a mixture of anger and sadness.

"Not tonight," Ryan says. "You guys should probably spend some time together."

So Ryan's starting to figure it out, to understand that there's something between Ben and me, or at least, that Ben feels something for me. He's not prepared to tread on Ben's toes when he's in such a fragile state, and I'm grateful for his thoughtfulness. It seems there's more to Ryan than meets the eye.

I nod and watch him take the bench opposite with Molly, whose ginger hair matches the color of the flames.

The soup tastes absolutely delicious. The heat from the bowl and the fire, along with the fresh, healthy food, rejuvenates me. I feel like I'm coming back from the dead, not just physically but psychologically too. For years I've been in battle mode. For years I've felt completely alone. But now I have people around me, people who will fight beside me. And it's the greatest feeling in the world.

I look over at Bree and Charlie laughing happily, as carefree as Trixie had been when I met her earlier. Finally they're getting to be children. But Ben is a different matter altogether. He seems even more withdrawn.

"Ben," I say cautiously. "Is everything okay?"

He looks at me slowly, a little dazed. "It's just being around all these people," he says. "It's a bit overwhelming."

I know it's more than that, but I don't want to push him to speak when he doesn't want to.

Everyone finishes their soup.

"I think you kids should be heading home now," I say to Bree and Charlie. They both look exhausted, like they're fighting to stay awake so they can be part of the festivities.

Bree pouts. "Can't we stay up a little longer?"

I shake my head. "It's been a long day. Ben will take you home."

Ben looks over at me and frowns, like he thinks I'm trying to get rid of him, when really I just want him to get a good night's sleep and rejuvenate. But he doesn't argue; he just stands, as though hypnotized,

and leads Charlie and Bree back home.

I watch them go. But as soon as I'm alone, I feel suddenly out of place surrounded by the other guards, all laughing and joking easily. For me, smiles come rarely. The past constantly lingers in my mind like a storm cloud, only parting occasionally to let in a ray of sunshine. None of these people have the same darkness inside of them. I should be feeling peaceful and happy right now, but I can't. I can't just see the crazy attack as a one-off to be forgotten, because for me it was just the latest battle in my long, never-ending fight against the world we live in. And while we won that particular fight, somewhere in the world, another group of children loses.

Ryan must notice my change in mood, because he comes over and extends his hand to me.

"Come on," he says.

"Where are we going?" I reply, looking at his outstretched hand.

"For a walk." He beckons, urging me on. "Come on," he presses.

I don't feel like I have much choice but to take his hand and let him guide me to my feet.

We walk. It's pitch black and the stars are twinkling above us as we stroll away from the light of the fire and out into the compound.

"Brooke, I know that you think the way the fort works isn't fair," he begins.

"What makes you say that?" I reply. "I understand why it has to work this way. I just don't think that it's enough for me."

"What do you mean?" he asks.

I pause, trying to gather my thoughts in such a way that I can articulate them. "I mean I have to do more," I begin, carefully. "I can't live with myself knowing others are out there dying. I need to do something. I can't be part of a place that doesn't do more to help people. It would make me a hypocrite."

"Does that mean you want to leave?" he asks, frowning.

I turn my face, unsure myself what I really want. It's true that I've started to question whether I've made the right call by coming here. Can I really sit back, after everything I've witnessed, and live out my life in peace, knowing that there's a thousand more Roses out there who need saving, a hundred more Flos trapped in the arenas, a dozen more Logans who have been forced into policing a city they loathe? But at the same time, how could I force my friends and my sister back out into that world? I couldn't. If I left, I would have to go alone. And that would mean leaving them behind.

Ryan gently touches my arm. Warmth radiates from the place where his fingertips touch me. "I don't want you to leave, Brooke," he says. "Will you stay? For me?"

I move my arm away, a little startled by the contact, by the

intensity of what he's asking me.

"I can't promise that," I say, not meeting his eye. But I know it's not enough, that I owe him more of an explanation. I take a breath then turn to meet his gaze. "Bree and I survived in the mountains for years. So did Ben and his brother. There are thousands more kids out there who don't have anyone to help them. There are so many more survivors."

"And you think it's our responsibility to be out there looking for them?" he challenges me.

"Don't you?" I say, my tone becoming more heated. "Don't you think we ought to help the innocent survivors of the war?"

I sigh, frustrated by the fact that Ryan and the rest of the people at Fort Noix have no idea at all what the real world is like now. It's not their fault that they've been completely protected from it all, but I can't help but feel the sting of injustice. That one random crazy attack can shake them to the core when for me, it's an everyday occurrence.

Ryan gives me a steely look. "I understand why you're angry. And trust me, you're not the only one who thinks that way. It's a controversial topic around here. But the Commander is an isolationist. It's what he fundamentally believes. It's kept us all alive so far, so why would he ever change it?"

He sighs when he sees that I'm still frowning.

"We do what we can, Brooke. We found you, didn't we? We took you in."

"That's not enough," I contest. "Four kids and a dog, when there's thousands out there. There are girls being kidnapped for the sex trade. There are kids fighting to the death for the entertainment of others. You're an army, trained fighters. You could make a difference."

His mouth twists to the side in consternation. I can tell that my words are getting to him. But at the same time, I know he's not going to change his mind. And why would he? Fort Noix is paradise for all who live within it. No one wants to rock the boat, or risk losing it all. Fighting off a bunch of crazies is one thing—willingly seeking them out is quite another.

Ryan lowers his voice and looks around cautiously, as if debating whether to tell me something.

"There are people who want to help others outside Fort Noix," he says. "There's actually a group who meet to discuss it."

"There is?" I say, relieved to hear that.

He nods.

"Zeke and Molly are among them. But you have to keep it quiet. The only way the Commander can keep the peace is by maintaining everything exactly as it is."

I understand the need for secrecy, but I'm intrigued and want to

know more.

"So what's their plan?" I ask. "What do they propose to do? Bring survivors back to Fort Noix?"

Ryan shrugs.

"I don't know. They're not rebelling or anything like that. They're just trying to build their numbers in order to persuade the Commander that it's what people want. If there's enough, he might listen."

"Do you think that will work?" I add. "Is he the sort of man who can be persuaded?"

He shrugs.

"It hasn't worked so far," Ryan replies.

I think about my meeting with the Commander earlier in the day. He'd been hard-line about us not joining Fort Noix, but I'd managed to convince him to change his mind. About Penelope too. There's leeway in him, definitely.

"I'd like to meet them," I say, "the others who want to search for survivors."

Ryan nods. "I'll take you to a meeting," he says. "If it's a way to get you to stay." He suddenly shoves his hands into his pockets and looks shy.

"Thanks," I reply, grateful for the darkness that is hiding my blush.

"Brooke," he says hurriedly, "I know it's early but…I wanted to ask you if maybe one day you'd want to go on a date with me? I mean, I know 'date' isn't really the right word for it anymore, but I just mean, well…you know what I mean."

His voice drops as he speaks and his gaze falls to my lips. I realize he's thinking about kissing me.

I want to say yes to a date, want to consent to a kiss, but something inside is holding me back. It's the shadow of Logan in my mind. It's the echo of Ben's kiss on my lips. And it's the horror of everything I've been through.

Ryan must sense my hesitation because he starts to rub his neck awkwardly. "Sorry, bad timing on my part, right? I mean we almost all died today and here I am asking you on a date."

"I'd love to," I interrupt him with a hurried whisper. "But I can't. Not now. Not yet."

"Because of what you went through in the arenas?" he asks.

I glance away, feeling suddenly uncomfortable and embarrassed.

"I have to figure out how to live in this new world first," I say. "I've spent so long fighting, I don't know who I am anymore. Do you understand?"

He looks a little hurt, but nods all the same.

Just then, I feel something cold land on my nose. It feels like rain, but softer. I look up and see that it's starting to snow.

"Winter comes early in Quebec," Ryan explains.

I keep gazing up, watching the snowflakes fall. I feel happy and content, grateful to be alive and well fed. But I also feel like staying at Fort Noix forever just won't be possible.

Out of the corner of my eye I can see Ryan watching me, studying me, trying to work me out.

"Will you at least stay for the winter?" Ryan says. "After everything you've been through, you deserve that much, don't you? It's not selfish to want to recuperate and rest. And you can help far more people in the spring. You don't know what our winters are like here."

I don't answer, but keep looking up at the falling snow, reflecting the twinkling starlight. I don't want to promise Ryan anything I won't be able to give.

"If you won't stay for me," he adds, quietly, "stay for Ben."

Finally, my head snaps over to look at Ryan. "What do you mean?" I challenge him.

"I've seen guys like that before," Ryan says. "I'm worried he might have PTSD."

I nod. I'd been thinking the same thing.

"You know everyone has to work here, right?" he adds. "The Commander isn't particularly kind when it comes to things like that."

"What do you mean?" I whisper.

"I mean the Commander wouldn't keep a useless soldier around. He doesn't have the resources or the motivation to rehabilitate damaged people."

My insides turn to ice at the thought of Ben being turfed out of Fort Noix and left to fend for himself when at his most vulnerable. If I'd had any concerns about leaving my friends and sister before, they're now magnified by ten times. If the Commander finds out about Ben's PTSD, he'll be kicked out for sure.

Which means for now, I have no choice but to stay and look after him.

I'll stay, I realize.

At least for now, I'll stay.

SIX MONTHS LATER

CHAPTER SIX

"Brooke! Brooke! Brooke!"

The crowd is cheering my name. My heartbeat races. My palms are sweaty. I start to tremble as I raise my bow. I poise, holding my stance, whispering a silent prayer under my breath. Then I let my arrow fly.

Bull's-eye.

I hit my target dead center. Flooded with relief, I turn to face the audience and squint against the spring sunshine. As my eyes orient to my surroundings, I remember where I am. Not in an arena, but on the firing range in Fort Noix: a big grassy field, beautiful and tranquil, peppered with the first flowering buds of spring. I'm not fighting to the death, but taking part in Fort Noix's annual shooting competition.

Beside me, Molly takes her own shot, hitting the bull's-eye too.

"Molly, Molly, Molly!" the crowd chants.

My competitiveness is set alight. Molly and I are the last two left in the knock-out competition. Now we have to go head to head, taking on an assault course, shooting moving targets that pop up as we go. It's made up of cars, tires, ropes, and climbing nets and has become my favorite thing to do in training. In fact, I've done it so many times now, I know how to jump and weave like a ninja.

A horn blares and we're off. I leap from one car hood onto a net, swiveling around to fire a shot at the target that's just popped up behind me. I get it right between the eyes and it pops back down again.

I quickly climb up the rope and heave myself onto a platform. Immediately another target pops up down below me. I crouch down and fire. I hit my target and it pops down again. The crowd starts cheering.

I shimmy down the netting on the other side and race past the tire stack. A target appears the other side. I can just about see it through a gap in the tires. I shoot through the hole and it disappears. Straightaway, another appears at the end of the stack, just by the finish line. I race toward it and shoot it out of my way, not even slowing down in the process. The crowd screams and cheers as I pass over the finishing line.

I've won.

"Brooke! Brooke! Brooke!"

Panting, I bend forward, exhausted from my run, and let the

sound of the cheering crowd filter into my mind, reminding myself that it is not the braying cry of biovictims but the cheer and support of my friends and allies. I catch sight of my instructor, General Reece, standing in her typical arms folded pose. There's a sliver of a smile on her lips, one that tells me she's pleased with my performance.

"The winner of our annual shooting competition," she announces, "is Brooke Moore!"

In the audience I see Bree and Charlie going wild and feel a swell of pride. Over the last six months that we've been in Fort Noix, they've both grown. Bree celebrated her eleventh birthday and is looking more like a teenager every day. It's amazing what a healthy diet of vegetables and meat can do to a girl.

Neena's also in the audience, looking on proudly like the surrogate mother she has become to me. Neena's one of the kindest women I've ever had the pleasure of knowing. She takes good care of all the girls in the house, making sure our bedding is clean and our clothes are mended, and though she can be fierce, life is harmonious.

But then I catch sight of Ben. He's clapping in the muted, emotionless way I've come to now expect from him. I feel a knot form in my stomach. I'm surprised that he even came to watch me compete since he's been doing everything he can to keep his distance from me.

Molly and Ryan come over to congratulate me on my win, quickly distracting me from my thoughts.

"And this is the girl who said she wasn't going to compete," Ryan says, kissing me on the cheek cordially.

It's true. It took General Reece more than a bit of encouragement to get me to compete. I was terrified about standing in front of an audience again after everything I've been through in the arenas, worried it would cause another flashback. But having people cheer me for my skill rather than bray for my blood is beyond healing. My only wish is that she could have convinced Ben to take part as well, but he hasn't touched a weapon since that first night at the outpost.

"Typical," Molly says, rolling her eyes playfully. "Even when Brooke doesn't want to do something she's still better than the rest of us!"

I can't help but smile. Their support means the world to me. Since Ben seems to be drifting further and further away from me, sometimes I think their friendship is the only thing that's keeping me going.

"So," I say, "do I get a medal or anything?"

Molly laughs. "It's not quite that easy to become a decorated soldier at Fort Noix," she tells me, knowingly. "Your reward is just to bask in your own triumph."

"That's good enough for me," I reply, jovially.

It's not just my mind that's been rejuvenated by the last six

months living and working in Fort Noix. It's my body. I've put on weight, my muscles are stronger, and all my wounds are healed. The snake bite is now nothing more than a cool silvery scar on my calf.

Bree and Charlie run over to me, Penelope yapping at their heels. When they reach me, they throw their arms around me and Penelope licks my hand. Watching them flourish is the best reward of all.

"Want to come to Trixie's?" Bree asks me once she releases me from her bear hug. "Charlie and me are going to play Jenga."

Charlie and Bree have been spending all their free time with the Forest Dwellers, particularly Trixie and her family, learning how to forage and playing games. Trixie's dad carved a Jenga set, which has been well played ever since.

"I'd love to," I say. "But I have plans."

I glance up at Ryan shyly. He smirks. Bree looks from me to Ryan then nods knowingly at Charlie. They think something romantic is happening between us, but really it's not. At least, I don't think it is. It's just that we've been spending a lot of time together out in the forest, hunting and fishing together, as well as discussing our positions at Fort Noix, and the Commander's isolationism. Because while I love seeing the kids thrive, I also know in my heart that I can't stay here forever. I need to go out looking for survivors. I have a moral duty. Ben's been safe under the radar for six months. I can't put my life on hold for someone who doesn't seem to want to know me anymore.

"Shall we?" Ryan says, gesturing toward the path that will lead us into the forest.

I can practically feel Ben's glare from here. I don't like hurting him, but I can't just stay on pause forever. He's the one pulling away from me, not the other way round.

I nod, and leave with Ryan.

* * *

The woods have become my favorite place. As much as I love Fort Noix and how well it runs, like a well-oiled machine, nothing can beat the peace and tranquility of the forest. If there's any good to have come out of the war, it's that nature is getting the chance to reclaim the earth. My only wish is that if civilization ever recovers, we don't destroy the environment again.

Ryan and I go straight to the river to check on the poles. Eating the food supplied by Fort Noix is one thing, but catching our own fresh food and cooking it on the bonfire is quite another.

We find that we've both had catches. I tug on my line and pull out a trout, its scales glistening in the spring daylight.

“Nice catch,” Ryan says when he sees it.

He’s smiling, but I don’t feel like returning the gesture.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, when he notices my lackluster expression. “Anyone would think you’d just lost the shooting competition!”

I take a deep breath. “Spring is here,” I say. “And I think it’s time to leave.”

Ryan’s expression falls. He always knew this day would come, but I think he’s been hoping that I’d change my mind.

“Is that still what you want?” Ryan asks.

I turn back to the water. It’s clear and glistening. The beauty of it is astounding. I wish I didn’t have to leave this peace and tranquility behind when I’ve only just found it.

“It is,” I say, hesitantly.

“But?” he presses, picking up on my undercurrent.

“But.” I pause. “But what exactly will the future hold? The country. Civilization. Will we ever get that back?”

Ryan shakes his head and lets out a little laugh. “Saving people’s lives isn’t enough for Brooke. She needs to save the world.”

I know he’s only joking but I can’t help but feel a little riled.

“Well, why not?” I demand. “What’s so bad about wanting everything back to the way it was before? Fort Noix is basically a normal town in many ways. If they can do it, we can do it somewhere else. Replicate the model.”

“I think you’re getting a bit ahead of yourself.”

I huff and bend down to check my pole again. There’s another trout wriggling on the end. I scoop it out of the water and lay it on the bank. It gasps its last breaths before falling still.

“Maybe I am being idealistic,” I say, “but saving a few lives here and there isn’t going to make a huge amount of difference. We need to start rebuilding the country. I wish…” I pause, struggling to get out my feelings. “I wish you would support me.”

“Hey,” Ryan says softly. “I’m sorry. I just don’t want you to die. Is that so bad?” Then he rests his hand on my arm. “How about we deal with the future when we get there?”

I fall silent and we stand there side by side. Then I feel him slide his hand down to my hand. For a brief moment, I let his fingers lace through mine. Then I pull away.

Ryan doesn’t say a word. He doesn’t question me or press me. He hasn’t for the last six months.

I look at him. His eyes are burning with desire, his gaze fixed on my lips. I’m overwhelmed with the desire to kiss him.

All at once, we hear a twig snap and the sound of pounding footsteps. We leap apart as Molly appears, frantic, running through

the shrubbery, her cheeks as red as her hair.

"What is it?" I ask, suddenly terrified.

"A message!" she says, panting.

Ryan frowns. "A message? What do you mean?"

"A transmission," Molly says again. "On the radio. Someone's contacted us from a camp in America."

Ryan and I exchange a disbelieving look. I can hardly believe it to be true. A survivors' camp in America?

I turn and race up the bank toward Molly, stashing my fish in a bag as I go. Ryan follows, leaving the kiss that never happened on the bank of the river.

And as I run, I sense that everything is about to change.

CHAPTER SEVEN

My heart's pounding as we tear through the forest. A message from America? What could it be? Molly must have alerted the Forest Dwellers to the news as well, because they're all racing a few paces ahead of us, heading into the compound.

Trixie sees me and bounds over.

"What's happening, Brooke?" she asks, clutching onto my arm. "Is it something bad?"

I shake my head. "Not bad at all. Someone's made contact with us. From another camp in America."

Her eyes widen with astonishment.

As we race through the gates, I see that literally everyone from Fort Noix is gathered in the main square where we hold our bonfire parties. With all the Forest Dwellers crammed in as well, it's completely packed. There are so many people all squashed in together, some are spilling out into the side streets. I don't think I've seen so many people in one place since before the war.

Someone's made a small makeshift stage and other guards are busy hooking up some speakers. They're going to use solar power to broadcast the message for us all to hear. The benches that are usually around the bonfire pit have been stretched out in front so that some people can sit, but no one does. They're too busy pacing restlessly, or standing around looking concerned. Everyone's feeling disconcerted by the news. But while most are reacting with anguish, the main emotion coursing through me is excitement. This could be the trigger, the moment I've been waiting for, to begin my search for survivors.

Trixie, Molly, Ryan, and I weave through the crowds. I search for Bree, knowing she'll be here somewhere, but there's too many people and I can't see her.

Suddenly, the crowd falls into a hushed silence. I look up and see

the Commander take to the stage.

"I believe most of you have heard the news in some form or another," he says. "So I'm here to confirm that yes, we have indeed picked up a radio transmission from America."

The crowd gasps. There's a hum as people start whispering. Someone moves through the crowd and slips beside me. It's Zeke. I can tell the instant I look into his eyes that he's thinking the same thing as me—that this could be the catalyst that turns the tide, that makes the majority of people realize that we have a duty to go out and look for survivors. Because here, at last, is the definitive proof that they exist.

The Commander tries to quiet the crowd down with his arms. "It is a recorded message," he explains. "We can't establish how long ago it was made. It could even have been from before the war."

I catch Zeke's eye.

"What did the message say?" someone cries.

"The frequency wasn't clear," the Commander replies. "And at times the message cuts out. But we will play it for you."

He nods to one of the guards, who goes over to the radio that's been hooked up to the loudspeakers, and flips a switch. Immediately, the crowd groans and covers their ears as a high-pitched squeak blasts out of the speakers. The guard quickly adjusts the volume to cancel out the horrible noise. Now the sound of crackling fills the square. It's intermittently punctuated by silence from where the transmission cuts out. Everyone listens intently.

"This is — of the — battalion. Our base — Texas. — survivors. — — — more."

My heart clenches. That's all there is. A garbled message about battalions, Texas, and survivors. But two things strike me more than anything else. The first is that this message has come from another military compound. The second is the last word: more. Because I can't help thinking it wasn't "more," but "Moore." The voice is too distorted to work out if it belongs to my dad. And though there's no way of making out the words that filled the silence before it was spoken, the person could easily have said, "there are many more," but he also had time to fit in, "This is Laurence Moore."

The message repeats again. I strain to hear the words, to recognize the voice, to fully understand what is being said and by whom. But it's no use. The volume of the crowd has notched up another level, there's too much interference, and the silences cut out the most important words. All I know for sure is that somewhere in Texas there's a military faction that survived long enough to send out a message about survivors and, though it would be a huge coincidence, there's a small chance that it could be from my dad.

“Have we been able to message them back?” a woman shouts.

“Do we have any idea who sent it?” another cries.

“That’s not the point,” someone else shouts. “The point is that there *are* other camps! We’re not the only one.”

It feels like pandemonium is descending on the compound.

The Commander waves his arms, trying to get everyone to shut up. “We have not been able to make radio contact with them. As I said, the message is recorded and repeats on a loop. There’s no way of knowing if the people who sent it are even still alive.”

“We’ve been combing the airwaves for four years!” Zeke shouts from beside me. “Wouldn’t we have heard it before now if it was old?”

The crowd agrees and the Commander looks flustered, like he’s starting to lose control. Everyone begins shouting at once.

“We need to make contact!”

“Can we send a search-and-rescue team?”

Suddenly I feel it, that the tides of opinion are changing. Never before have the people of Fort Noix received a direct call. Before, it was easy for them to sit back idly because there was no real proof that there were other survivors’ camps out there. But now the proof has arrived, and people are becoming unsettled.

Ryan gives me a mournful smile. He knows full well what I’m thinking: that I want to leave in search of the Texan survivors. He knows that he is finally about to lose me. I feel terrible for him, but when I look over at Molly’s and Zeke’s triumphant expressions, my resolve returns. The turn of the tide is exciting for all of us. My dream of rebuilding civilization might be about to happen. Now, I just need the people of Fort Noix to demand that the Commander use his resources to start helping those in need.

But there’s still a strong isolationist faction arguing against those who are challenging the status quo.

“We can’t risk being found!” they cry. “It would be a suicide mission!”

Everyone’s shouting. The voices that are demanding that the Commander help become louder, bolder, stronger. More forceful. They start drowning out the shouts from the isolationists and any of the supporting voices of the Commander.

“We made an agreement years ago,” the Commander cries. “Fort Noix does not seek survivors. Our own survival depends on us remaining secret and hidden.” But as he looks out over the crowd, his expression changes, like he can see that it is not enough anymore, that many, many people no longer agree. “I ask of you all, please, that we sit down and talk about this. Democratically.”

People begin to fall silent, taken aback by the mention of democracy, something that a fort run on military command doesn’t

usually get to experience. I catch sight of General Reece's distasteful expression, as though she certainly would have preferred this not have been resolved diplomatically at all.

"There is no need to shout and argue," the Commander adds. "I'm not going to force people to do things they don't want to. But we need a frank and honest discussion about what it entails, how these decisions may impact the rest of the group. The security of Fort Noix has always been, and will always remain, my paramount concern."

We all settle down, sitting on the ground and benches. It reminds me of kids at kindergarten sitting on a storytime rug, only we're soldiers, and we're discussing something far graver than a five-year-old could ever imagine.

"Say the message is recent," the Commander begins, "we can take it as fact that there are indeed survivors out there. Who feels that we should be searching for survivors?"

There's a show of hands, and I look around to see that far more people than just our group have raised their hands in support. I feel a swirl of happiness in my stomach to know that so many people share my belief about looking for survivors.

"And what do you people propose we do with them?" the Commander asks calmly.

Nicolas, a man in our group, begins to speak. "We want to go on short missions to rescue them and bring them back to the fort."

General Reece shakes her head. "That would be out of the question. It would alert slaverunners to our presence."

"Then what about creating a safe place for them nearby?" Molly asks. "We can train them to guard and patrol like we do."

People murmur in agreement, as though this is indeed a good idea. It would make Fort Noix a town of separatists rather than isolationists.

"How many people would be willing to set up this new fort?" the Commander asks.

Many of the people I've been speaking with over the last six months volunteer themselves, including Trixie and her family, and a large number of the Forest Dwellers. The Commander nods, though he looks a little stung to see so many wishing to leave.

"Then, please," he says, "know you have my blessing to do what you think is right. But let me make it clear right now. If you leave, you cannot come back. It's too risky."

General Reece nods. "I agree. If you're going to be going out on multiple rescue missions, you're bound to be noticed by someone sooner or later. You cannot lead those people here."

"I understand," Nicolas replies. "We're all aware of the dangers."

Molly nudges me and gives me a thumbs-up. What we've wanted

for months is finally coming to fruition. People will be saved, given a chance at life like me, Bree, Ben, and Charlie were. But something is still niggling in the back of my mind. The message. The American military base.

"What about the radio message?" I say. "Can we send a team to Texas to make contact with the survivors there?"

Silence falls across the crowd.

The Commander looks at me. "We don't know for certain if the survivors there are still alive," he says. "And Texas is a very long way to travel on the off chance that they are."

"It's a chance that many of us are willing to take," I say, confidently.

But when I look around, to my dismay I find that no one is agreeing with me. I realize in that moment that they've changed their minds. Making limited local runs to rescue people is enough for them. Heading across the length of America is too much. Traveling all the way to Texas was never the plan. I feel deflated.

"Like I said," the Commander replies, noting the complete lack of support anyone is giving me, "you're free to leave. But you cannot come back."

I know I should just be happy that, at last, there will be a group of people searching for survivors.

But it's not enough. Because I can't help thinking that the person trying to contact us could be my dad, that he could have survived the war just like the Commander did, and started his own group. Even if there's only a million to one chance that it is him, I have to find out.

And that means leaving Fort Noix.

And if need be, alone.

I breathe in deeply.

"In that case," I say, "I want to leave."

The silence would be deafening if it weren't for the shrill cry of a young girl coming from somewhere at the back of the crowd. It takes me a second to realize that the cry is coming from Bree.

I look over my shoulder and see her pelting through the crowd, making a beeline for me. Guilt swirls inside of me. I once made a promise to her that I would never leave her, and here I am, breaking it to her in the least sensitive way ever, that I'm going to do just that.

She reaches me and flings herself into my lap.

"I don't understand what's happening!" she sobs into my chest. "You want to leave? But you'd never be able to come back!" She pulls away, her tear-stained face bright red with emotion. "What about me? Charlie? Ben? What about us?"

I'm about to soothe her and explain my theory about Dad, when Neena pushes her way through the crowd and puts a maternal arm

around Bree, as if trying to shield her from the pain I'm causing.

"Come on," Neena says in hushed tones as she heaves her to her feet. "Let the grown-ups talk. This is no place for a child."

Bree looks at me through red-rimmed eyes, her bottom lip trembling, then lets Neena lead her away. Ben and Charlie follow them through the crowd, both glaring at me darkly.

My heart breaks as Bree disappears. I feel awful to have caused her pain. I need to explain to her about Dad, about my gut feeling that the message is from him. Once she understands that, she'll see why I have no choice but to leave.

"Brooke," General Reece says, "I think you should reconsider leaving. You'd be going to Texas on nothing more than a hunch. I don't want to lose my best shooter."

"It's more than a hunch," I reply. "Zeke's right when he said we would have picked the message up sooner if it had been recorded years ago. I'm absolutely certain that message has only just been sent, that they're all alive. I want to find them."

"I'm with Brooke," a voice says and my heart skips a beat

I turn and look over at Ryan. All these months that we've been debating isolationism and rescuing survivors, he's been the person most opposed to my views. He's always wanted to stop me from leaving, to convince me that it's better just to stay. Yet now, he's the first to volunteer to come with me.

"Why?" I ask, astonished.

He smirks. "Because the chances of you changing your mind are nil," he says. "And I'm not about to let you walk out alone into your death. So that leaves me no other option."

My stomach flips. That Ryan would do that for me, it's more than my heart can handle.

"I'm coming too."

I turn and am floored to see Molly smiling back.

"Unless I'd be a third wheel," she adds wryly.

"You won't," Zeke adds. "Because I'll be with you all."

I look from one to the other, relief swelling inside of me that I'm not doing this alone. And gratitude. I am touched that they care about me so much that they'd all risk their lives for me.

"Brooke," the Commander says, "come to my office tomorrow morning. All of you," he adds, addressing Zeke, Ryan, and Molly. "We'll formulate a plan for your departure."

My stomach flips again at the thought that this is really happening, and that the Commander is going to help me. My whole body is a mixture of excitement and anticipation. After six months of dreaming about leaving this place, it's finally about to happen.

But there's something else there too, a deep, hollow sensation

inside of me. I realize it's the thought of leaving Charlie, Ben, and Bree behind. I know they won't come with me. Bree loves Fort Noix too much, Charlie is her hopelessly devoted shadow who will do anything she asks, and Ben's too unwell to come even if he wanted to.

But I cannot change my mind now—and I don't want to. Other survivors might be out there. And among them, I even dare to hope, my father.

I have sealed my fate.

CHAPTER EIGHT

When I enter my room, Bree, sitting on the bottom bunk bed, puts her book down and stares at me. That look kills me. She's annoyed at me for rocking the boat, for bringing disorder and chaos into her previously stable life, but I decide not to sugar coat it. Bree's matured a lot over the last few months. She deserves the truth. I sit beside her on the bed. She looks so serious, so grown up. I feel a pang of loss for the little girl she used to be.

"Bree, I'm sorry," I begin, but she cuts me off.

"I think the Commander's right," she says, seriously. "Fort Noix is the first place we've been safe. We don't have to worry about slaverunners or going hungry. Have you already forgotten what it was like out there? Don't you remember how it felt to be starving? I never want to feel that again." There's accusation in her tone.

"But there are other people out there," I argue gently. "Other survivors. Don't you think we should find them?"

Bree just shakes her head. "No. I don't. The Commander would let them in if they made it here just like he did with us. But I don't think we should go looking for them. It's way too dangerous."

"What if one of them was Dad?" I contest.

Bree frowns. She looks even madder than before.

"We don't even know if Dad's alive," she says.

"We don't know for certain," I admit. "But I have this feeling deep inside of me that he is. Like if the Commander can survive this long, then why not Dad? He was one of the best in the platoon, you heard the Commander say that."

"But what does your thinking Dad's alive have to do with going to Texas?"

I know she's going to think I'm crazy, but she has to understand why I'm so adamant about leaving. "The radio message. I think it was from Dad."

Bree looks at me sadly. "I see Mom all the time, too. It's just part of grief."

"It's not like that," I snap. "I'm not seeing ghosts." She goes to roll

her eyes but I grab her roughly by the shoulder. “Listen,” I demand. “The message is from a military base. Dad was in the military. It’s in Texas. Dad trained in Texas. He said ‘Moore,’ right at the end!”

Bree wrenches her shoulders from my grasp. “And that’s enough for you to just up and leave?”

“That and a feeling right in here,” I say, touching my heart, “that Dad is alive out there somewhere and now that we’re strong enough to find him we should.”

Bree sighs heavily. “Nothing I say will change your mind, will it?”

I look down into my lap, ashamed. “You know I don’t want to leave you.”

“Do I?” she snaps.

“Of course I don’t!” I cry. “You’re my sister. I love you.”

She flashes me a haughty look. “You left Mom.”

The words sting more than a slap to the face. My little Bree, whom I did everything in the world for, is challenging me over one of the hardest decisions I ever had to make, one that I made to make sure she stayed alive.

I’m not prepared to argue with her. It feels as though being at Fort Noix has turned her from a helpless kid into an independent one. She’s acting like she doesn’t need me anymore. Maybe she doesn’t.

I stand from the bed and climb into the top bunk. With an angry sigh I stare at the ceiling.

“I love you, Bree,” I say. “Whatever happens, remember that.”

She doesn’t say anything back.

* * *

I pace down the darkened corridor, tiptoeing so no one can hear my footsteps. I’m deep in the bowels of Fort Noix, though I can’t quite recall how I got here.

At the far end of the corridor, light seeps out from beneath a door. It’s one of those big steel doors like in a submarine. I realize then that I’m far, far underground.

I creep up to the door and press my ear against it. Inside, I can just about make out a deep rumbling voice with a strong South Carolina accent. It’s the Commander.

I can only hear some of the words he’s saying but it’s enough to gather that he’s speaking to someone about the radio message, about the group of survivors in America. Then I pick out something that makes my heart stop.

“Laurence Moore.”

That’s my dad’s name. What’s the Commander doing talking

about my dad?

I shove the door open. The Commander's back is to me. He's bent over a large machine which I assume to be some kind of radio device. It takes up the whole other half of the room. A single light bulb hangs from the ceiling, casting a dirty dark yellow light over the room, making the shadows stark.

When I barge into the room, he spins around to face me. But it's not the Commander I come face to face with. It's my dad.

He's in full military gear, looking exactly like he did the last time I saw him. Behind him the radio bleeps and crackles.

Confused, I start to stagger back, but all at once, the ground beneath my dad gives way. The entire floor to the secret bunker room is collapsing. He screams as he plunges down, with bits of the huge radio machine falling after him.

"Dad!" I cry, reaching for him.

It's no use. He's fallen a good thirty feet to the bottom of a long pit. The wires of the device have snapped and dangle against the wall. Every time they touch, electricity zaps across them, sending sparks down on my dad. He peers up at me, terrified.

That's when I realize I'm not alone. All around the perimeter of the room, looking down at my dad in the pit, are hundreds upon hundreds of biovictims. They shout and jeer, waving their fists in the air.

My dad is in an arena.

From the far end, a door opens and a huge spider, at least ten feet tall, crawls into the arena. Its legs are as thick as tree trunks. It scuttles toward my dad as fast as a tiger. The spectators go wild.

He looks up at me. "Brooke!" he cries. "Brooke! Help me! You have to come to me!"

I start to scream.

I wake, screaming, and look all around.

I realize I'm back in my room, in my bunk bed. Daylight is streaming through the curtains and Bree snores softly in the bed beneath me. My heart is beating fast. I take deep breaths to try and calm myself down. It was just a dream, I tell myself. Just a dream.

But it felt like a dream that was telling me something. Urging me to find my dad. To help him.

Telling me that he's alive.

Quietly, I climb down the ladder of my bunk bed and land softly on the ground. I take the fresh uniform Neena cleaned and ironed for me and slip it on, feeling the rough fabric against my skin. It's a sensation I've become familiar with over the last six months at Fort Noix. As I sling the backpack over my shoulder, I hear Bree's voice coming from behind me.

"You're an idiot, Brooke," she says.

I tense. I hate hearing my sister so angry, and I can't help but draw painful comparisons to the way I left Mom, the last bitter words I said to her.

Without looking back, I say, "I'm sorry, but I have to do this."

I take one more step, stop, and add: "I love you. Don't ever forget that."

There comes silence in return.

Then, without another word, I step out of this room, out of this new life, for what may be the very last time.

CHAPTER NINE

Molly, Zeke, Ryan, and I watch quietly as the Commander spreads a map out on the table in front of us. We're in his office in the busy main building, the one where he'd first decided to let us stay all those months ago. Now, here he is, helping me to leave.

The map looks incredibly old. People stopped making physical maps because technology surpassed the need for them, and most of the ones still in existence would have been poached from museums around the early twenty-first century. There's no doubt in my mind that this map is an old, historical relic, stolen in a raid years ago. There's no way of knowing for sure if the roads depicted on it will still be there, or that there won't be extra settlements on the way not shown, places where unsavory people might dwell.

General Reece leans over and taps a spot on the map. "This is us," she says. Then she runs her finger down the length of the map all the way to Houston, Texas. "And here is where the signal came from."

I frown and lean forward, looking more closely at the map in the dingy yellow light. It looks like such an enormous distance to cover. The thought is daunting.

"I would recommend you stick to the waterways wherever possible," she continues. "It will be safer. Faster. And will require less fuel. Stay far from the shores. Take the Lawrence River and head west as far as you can."

I'd been planning on leaving by the same route I arrived, traveling alongside the Hudson toward New York. It seemed logical to me to retrace my steps, to tread familiar ground, at least for the initial part of the journey. But looking at the map makes me realize that my plan is too risky. New York is crawling with slaverunners, and is the site of Arena 1. She's right: passing through it via land would be incredibly dangerous. By sticking to the waterways and following the river for as long as possible, we'll be able to bypass many of the main highways and cities.

"There's just one snag," I say. "I don't have a boat."

It's the Commander who answers.

"We'll give you a boat, Brooke," he says, almost matter-of-factly.

My mouth drops open at the news. I can hardly believe it. Molly and Zeke are both wide-eyed in disbelief, too. My first instinct is to ask him why, why he would choose to help me by offering up a precious vehicle like a boat, but I decide against it.

General Reece taps the map again, pointing to a place in Ohio on the banks of the river.

"If you survive that far," she adds, "the water can take you all the way to Toledo. There's an old train station there, built during the war as a way to transport coal down south. There are tracks running all the way to Texas."

"Really?" I gasp, my voice rising several pitches at the stroke of luck.

She nods in her typically emotionless way. It takes all my willpower to contain my excitement. General Reece and the Commander have no idea how grateful I am to them for the information.

The tracks aren't on the ancient map, so General Reece leans forward and draws a straight red line from Toledo to Chicago, then all the way down to Houston, Texas.

"This is your first main danger point," she says, tapping Chicago. She runs her finger down to St. Louis, Missouri. "This is your second one."

"Why?" Zeke asks.

"They're both major cities and the tracks run straight through them," the Commander explains. "And where there are cities, there are arenas."

I shudder at the thought.

"So we go around them," I say. "Adds a day or two to the journey, but it's not worth the risk."

General Reece frowns. "You can't go around them," she states, blandly. "You'll be on a train."

I pause and draw my eyebrows together. "We will?"

"Well yes, of course," she replies. She taps Toledo again. "The train station is relatively new. It operated throughout most of the war. The chances of it still being operable are highly likely. Especially since all you need is coal. You'll just need to find an engine still on the tracks, fire up the coal, and you'll be away."

Molly lets out a little squeak of surprise. I shake my head, unable to comprehend.

"I'm sorry, you want me to drive a *train*?" I stammer.

"A coal-powered train," General Reece says with a nod, as if that

makes any difference.

I take a seat as I try to catch my breath, completely stunned by the enormity of the journey ahead of me. This journey is going to take me entirely out of my comfort zone.

The Commander looks at me curiously. “If you don’t think you can handle it, Brooke,” he says, “maybe it would be best not to go at all. You’ve made a decent life for yourself here. There’s a group about to head out looking for survivors to start their own colony. You could always go with them. Take your sister. Your friends.”

I shake my head, determined. “No,” I say, forcefully. “I can do this.”

“You can,” Molly agrees.

“We can,” Ryan adds.

I look up at my friends’ faces. They all seem to have so much faith in me, so much belief. They’re willing to leave their home to help me follow my dream.

“Any of you guys ever driven a train before?” I ask.

Everyone breaks into a smile.

* * *

My arms ache as I heave the last of the supplies into the thirty-foot sailboat, making it rock on the banks of the river. We have a huge stash of weapons; plenty of dried food provisions like cured meat and pickled vegetables; changes of clothes; and a medical kit containing slings, bandages, and antibiotics in case of emergencies.

I then reach over and begin loading the thirty-gallon drums of fuel, knowing how precious each one is as General Reece hands them to me.

“We can only spare four,” she explains, as I load the last one. “You’ll need to sail as much as you can. Use the fuel sparingly, only if you’re in trouble or in bad weather. That engine is really meant for backup, anyway. Remember, this is primarily a sailboat, not a yacht.”

I nod, taking it all in. The Commander’s map is safely stashed in my pocket. Of all the items on board the boat, it is by far the most precious. Without the map, we’ll just be four people wandering through America.

Jack jumps excitedly into the boat, kissing me first, as he always does, and I feel reassured to have the pit bull with us.

Four people and a dog, I think to myself.

“You ready for this?” Molly asks, coming up to my side.

Her question makes me aware of the flutter of panic in my chest. “I guess,” I reply. Then I look at her and frown. “Why did you decide

to come with me?"

The corners of her lips turn up. "You might be the best shooter in Fort Noix, but you're not going to get very far without the second best watching your back."

She says it in her usual dry way. But I read between the lines of her sarcasm. She's coming because I'm her friend and she wants to help me. The thought is beyond comforting.

Jack starts barking at something in the distance, and I look over to see figures approaching.

"Looks like our farewell party has arrived," Ryan says.

A group of guards comes up to Ryan, clapping him on the shoulder and embracing him. There are people there for Molly and Zeke as well. My stomach drops at the realization that no one has come to say goodbye to me. A part of me understands Ben not being here. His PTSD has driven a wedge between us and we've grown apart over the last six months. And Charlie, of course, won't be here unless Bree is. But it's Bree's absence that hurts me the most. I know she's mad at me but I wish she would at least come to say goodbye. It reminds me, painfully, of the way I let my dad walk out of my life all those years ago. I'd refused to say goodbye to him because I'd seen him hit my mom and was mad about him leaving us for the army. In my darker moments, that memory has haunted me.

As I'm dwelling in my emotions, I suddenly catch sight of a figure standing a little way behind the others. It's Ben.

My heart leaps at the sight of him. I always thought Ben was handsome, with his soft features and gentle eyes, but right now he looks beautiful, standing so still like a statue in the midday sunshine.

He notices me looking but doesn't approach. I wonder if he was planning on just watching me leave and think maybe I shouldn't say anything to him. Then I decide that I don't care about his poignancy, and head toward him.

"You came to say goodbye," I say as I walk up to him.

He shakes his head. "I came because I wanted to come with you."

His words shock me. We've barely spoken for six months and now he's telling me he wants to up and leave Fort Noix to be with me.

"You do?" I stammer.

He nods, his expression pained. "I did. But this was as far as I could go."

I look him up and down, frozen to the spot as though with fear. The group of well-wishers are down by the shoreline. Ben's PTSD has stopped him from getting any closer.

Once again, I feel guilty about leaving him here. He's managed so far to just about present himself as well enough. He's kept himself beneath the radar. But what if my leaving triggers something in him,

makes him worse?

"Are you going to be okay, Ben?" I say.

He nods, but I can see tears glittering in his eyes. The sight of them makes my own emotions threaten to choke me. Ben's been by my side more or less since Bree was kidnapped. We've been together through everything. The last six months as he's pulled away from me has made me unaware of just much I will miss him.

Suddenly, I realize how much of a jerk I've been to Ben. I've been pushing him away for months, unable to deal with his detached, grief-stricken ways. I'd run to Ryan like a moth to a flame, wanting to be with someone who wasn't so damaged, to have a friendship where for once I didn't have to be the strong one. Bree's right. I am an idiot.

I fly into Ben's arms and hold him tightly, so tightly I can feel his heart beating against my chest.

"Come with me," I whisper into his ear. "Please."

He shakes his head. "I wish I could," he replies, his voice tremulous. "You have no idea how much I wish I could."

I pull away from the embrace, feeling like my heart is splintering into a thousand pieces.

"Look after Bree," I say, quickly wiping the tears from my eye.

Then I turn and head back to the boat.

"You ready?" Ryan asks, offering his hand to help me into the boat.

I don't take it, just step onto the boat beside him.

"Let's do this," I say.

We raise the sails together. I yank on the coarse lines and already my palms are burning; it takes more power to raise the sails than I'd imagined. They rise slowly, one foot at a time, and I must use all the leverage of my body to get them up. Molly helps beside me, while Ryan leans over the hull and raises the anchor. Zeke secures the lines and turns the rudder, and a moment later, I experience the most incredible feeling: we are moving. The wind catches our sail, and foot by foot we begin to leave shoreline and gain momentum.

I look back, taking one long, last look. I wonder if I will ever see this place again. My heart aches from my goodbye with Ben, from knowing I can never come back.

"Look, Brooke," Molly says.

I see all the people amassing on the shore, standing on the banks, saluting. The four of us salute back. I wish my dad could see me now.

We stand there, saluting each other, as the boat drifts farther and farther away. Then, farther down the shoreline, we see another group of people. It's the Forest Dwellers. They wave, clap, and cheer. I see that Trixie is there at the front, her giant bunny in her arms. The sight of her reminds me why I am doing this; to make the world safer for

everyone.

We wave back, feeling like superstars. The sounds of the cheers make me smile.

That's when I notice that one person isn't waving or smiling like the others. It's Bree. She's standing beside Trixie, with Charlie clutching her arm on the other side. She watches me, silently, her chin tipped up.

I let my waving hand drop. As the boat sails past, we continue to watch each other, our gazes locked together. I watch the figure of my little sister grow smaller and smaller as the distance between us lengthens. I watch until she is nothing more than a smudge on the horizon. My heart breaks as it never has, as I am filled with waves of self-doubt and guilt.

Then I turn around and face the open water, ready to take on the rest of my life.

Ready to find my father.

PART TWO

CHAPTER TEN

Ryan sits in the stern, steering the boat, Jack beside him, paws up on the rail, his tongue lolling. I lean back, letting the wind catch in my hair, tousling it behind me. It is surprisingly windy and because of the speed, the wind is bracingly cold. My nose is stinging and my cheeks are frozen.

It feels good to be on the move, to know my journey has finally begun. After all these months thinking about this moment, it has finally arrived. It's especially great to be on the water, away from the cities and destruction. Out here, you can almost pretend the war didn't happen.

The water sparkles beneath us as we cut through it at speed. I let it relax me. If it weren't so cold, I'd almost be tempted to sunbathe.

"Take a look at that!" Ryan calls over his shoulder.

I sit up and see where he's pointing. Up ahead are lots of small islands dotting the water. Some are filled with trees, like mini floating forests. Some are linked by bridges, now rusted and falling apart. On others there are houses; big, grand buildings that are beginning to crumble into the water.

"Did people live in those?" I say, surprised.

Zeke holds up the map and points to the St. Lawrence River, which we are currently sailing down. "Must be the Thousand Islands," he says, tapping the blobs of green that run along the length of the river.

I watch, awestruck, as we weave in and out of the islands. I can't even begin to imagine the sort of community that would have lived here, needing a boat to get to their neighbor's house, or to the mainland for school and work. The houses are very plush, making me think that they must have been inhabited by rich people.

We pass a house that would have been a mansion in its heyday. It's covered in thick ivy that strangles all the windows, turning it into something out of a children's fairy tale. For a moment, I wonder what it would be like if we all pulled over and moved into one of these mansions, lived out our days here, in crumbling opulence. I wonder if anything inside is still intact. Chandeliers? Marble fireplaces? Priceless rugs? Antiques?

All of that, if not looted, would surely be ruined by now. We'd be living in a hull of a mansion, unheated, without food or running water. I shake my head. It is a mirage of opulence, a dream from another era.

"This is where the others should bring the survivors," Molly says with a laugh. "Can you imagine?"

I cast my mind back to the moment we were rescued in the Hudson River. After our horrendous ordeal, finding Fort Noix was like stepping into paradise. But finding this place would have been like stepping into another world, a dreamland.

"Too bad we can't go back and tell them about this place," I say, with a hint of bitterness in my voice.

Molly picks up on my tone. "Are you pissed with the Commander for saying we can't go back?"

I shake my head. For all his faults, the Commander really came through for me in the end. Without him we wouldn't have the map or the boat.

"It's not that," I say, gazing out over the crystal blue water.

"Is it Bree?" Molly probes.

My heart squeezes at the memory of her watching me silently from the shoreline. She truly believes that I've left her forever. She has no faith in me to find our dad. In my mind, I'll make it to Texas and send a radio transmission home, calling to her. Or drive one of the military tanks up and collect her myself. But in her mind, I've left her behind, just like I left Mom. Just like Dad left us. What she thinks I've done to her is unforgivable.

When I don't say anything, Molly puts her arm around my shoulder. She holds me like that, not saying a word, just letting me be present in my pain.

Just then, the clouds start to darken.

"Looks like rain," Zeke says, gazing at the sky.

We all look up at the graying clouds starting to crowd above us.

The boat is completely exposed. Depending on how bad the storm is, we could be soaked to the bone if we keep going. But I don't want to have to stop so soon after leaving.

"Why don't we stop off there?" Molly says, pointing up ahead to where an amazing castle stands on one of the tree-covered islands.

My mouth drops open. "It's beautiful," I gasp.

Ryan, at the helm of the boat, looks over at me and raises an eyebrow. "Well? Time for sightseeing?"

Just then, the rain begins to fall. It's a cold, hard rain that lashes us.

"Pull over," I say. "Let's shelter in the castle."

Molly pulls the line on her side, and we all duck as we tack and the boom swings, while Ryan steers us toward the little island that houses the castle. He steers us expertly to a stop by the small jetty.

Jack's the first off the boat, jumping off and running onto the steady ground and barking his excitement. He pees, then rushes off toward the castle, taking in all the new smells of grass, mud, and stone.

Molly and I leap off while Zeke ties up the boat. As soon as he's done, Ryan follows, and the four of us race into the castle.

We're soaking wet by the time we're inside. The castle has seen better days, and parts of the ceiling have caved in. Water drips down, pooling in the middle of the large, marble floor.

There's a spiral staircase leading up, a broken piano in one corner of the hall, and a grandfather clock that's no longer ticking. Black mold spots the walls and there's a dank smell.

So much for my fantasy of opulence.

"Where's Jack?" Ryan asks, peering through the gloom.

"He ran off that way," Zeke says, pointing down one of the corridors.

We begin to walk down the corridor, our footsteps echoing across the marble tiles.

"Jack!" Ryan calls. "Where are you, boy?"

There's the sound of barking from far in the distance. We head toward the sound.

"Hey," I say as we go. "What's that up ahead?"

Everyone looks, peering through the darkness. There seems to be something glowing in the distance, like some kind of source of light. But it's too yellow to be daylight. It looks more like a flame.

"A fire!" I gasp, suddenly alerted to the fact that someone else is here.

Immediately we draw our weapons. My mind races. Who could be here? A crazy colony? A group of slaverunners camping out on their way to the cities?

A lone survivor?

Suddenly, Jack emerges from the shadows. He leaps up at Ryan, licking him.

"Whoever it is," Ryan says, "Jack seems to think it's safe. He's usually a good judge of character."

"Who is there?" a voice calls from the darkness.

We all freeze, our guns poised, ready to fire. Shadows leap across the stone walls as a figure slowly shuffles toward us. As he gets closer, I see that it's a young Hispanic boy, maybe fifteen. He's thin with a baby face.

"Don't come any closer!" I shout, jabbing my gun forward for emphasis.

The boy holds his hands up. "That's not a very polite way to treat your host," he says. "You are in my home, after all."

My eyes dart right and meet Molly's. She's pulling a bemused expression.

"You live in this castle?" I say to the boy. "Alone?"

"All alone," the boy replies. "You're the first people I've seen in

four years." He looks away as though pained. "I'd started to think I was the last."

"The last what?" I ask.

"The last human on earth."

My heart aches for him. To have spent all those years alone, thinking he was the only one left. It's a thought too horrible to bear.

I lower my gun.

"I'm Brooke," I say, holding my hand out to shake his.

He looks at me, guarded, unsure whether he can trust the girl who moments earlier was pointing a gun in his face. In the end he takes my hand.

"Emmanuel," he says.

He peers over at the others, their guns still trained on him. The rest of the gang take my lead and lower their weapons.

"You got any food in there?" he asks, eyeing my bag.

"If you've got a fire we can dry ourselves by," I reply.

He nods. "This way."

We follow him down the corridor and into a large hall that resembles a ballroom. The mold smell is even worse in here. There's a large marble fireplace in one of the walls with a small fire burning in the middle. We all rush over and begin to warm ourselves.

I notice that Emmanuel is eyeing my satchel.

"Help yourself," I say, knowing there are enough rations in the boat to last us for weeks.

He opens up the bag and pulls out some dried meat strips, then starts to eat them ravenously. The sight of him gorging reminds me of the hunger that was a constant fixture in my life in the mountains. Thanks to being regularly fed in Fort Noix, I'd let myself forget what it felt like to starve. I feel a sudden pang of empathy for the boy.

"How did you get here, Emmanuel?" I ask him.

His mouth is stuffed with dried meat, but he speaks anyway.

"I'm from Toronto," he replies. "When the rebels came and took it over, my family and I had to flee the city. There were loads of other people with us, maybe a thousand. Maybe even two." He pauses, swallows, then takes another huge mouthful of meat. "We had to go on foot. It was a long journey. We were following the river because we didn't have a map or compass or anything. We'd got as far as the Thousand Islands when the bombs fell. They were killed."

"Your family?" I ask gently.

"Everyone," he replies. "I was the only one who didn't die."

I gasp, trying to imagine a group of two thousand people obliterated in one bomb strike, leaving just one boy alive.

"I don't know what made me jump in the water," he adds. "I guess it was some kind of instinct to just get away from it all, from all

that death." He shudders as he relives the moment. "I just jumped in the water and started swimming. Then I ended up here."

"And you've been here ever since," I reply.

I'm amazed by his story. If he is indeed fifteen, and has been here for four years, he was Bree's age when everyone he knew was killed in one second. How he found the strength and resolve to carry on, I don't know.

Molly whistles. "That quite a story, Emmanuel," she says.

He glares at her, at her insensitivity. I can almost feel him screaming in his mind that it's not a story, it's his life. Molly's my friend and I have to remind myself that she hasn't seen the same kind of pain and devastation as we survivors have. It's harder for her to empathize with someone like Emmanuel than it is for me. In fact, none of them do. Not Molly, Ryan, or Zeke.

Suddenly, I feel the absence of Ben like a hole in the heart. He'd get it right away. His sensitivity and understanding would be really welcome round about now. But I know that's not going to happen, so I'm going to have to try and do it myself.

"I'm a survivor too," I say. "I lived in the mountains in New York. Just me and my sister."

"Is she dead?" Emmanuel asks.

I shake my head. "No. She's safe. Happy." At least, I hope she will be eventually, once she's gotten over my betrayal.

The rain lashes outside, and the sky is starting to darken. It makes me feel uneasy. With nightfall comes extra danger. Us not being able to see properly gives predators—be they slaverunner, wild creature, or crazies—the advantage. But Emmanuel has survived here alone for years, so it must be safe. Still, the thought of us having to camp out overnight here doesn't exactly thrill me.

"Why did you leave New York?" Emmanuel asks.

"We had no choice," I reply. "Slaverunners found us."

Emmanuel looks confused. "What are slaverunners? Are they the deformed people?"

It takes me by surprise that Emmanuel's hideout is so cut off from everything that he doesn't even know what slaverunners are.

"Slaverunners control the cities," I explain. "They go out looking for survivors to put to work or…" My voice trails away. "To use for entertainment."

I can feel everyone's eyes on me. Of all the things that interest my new friends, it's my time in the arenas that intrigues them the most. I've never fully spoken about it as it hurts too much to think of. Recalling memories of Logan is still excruciatingly painful.

"There are still cities?" Emmanuel asks. "With survivors in them?"

"Yes. But they're dangerous places now. The only safe places are

the military-run survivors' camps. There's one just north of here. You should go. You'd be safe there."

"I'm safe here," Emmanuel replies. "No one bothers me. The only thing that worries me are the deformed people, but they just sail right past."

I pause, my attention suddenly alerted. "Wait," I say. "What do you mean they sail right past?"

Emmanuel prods the fire with a stick nonchalantly. "Well, they don't know I'm here. It's not like I have a boat or anything that would draw their attention to me."

Molly's eyes suddenly snap wide open as she comes to the same realization as me. Our boat is tied to the jetty in full view. We didn't even think to hide it. But if there are crazies in this area, they will surely have spotted it.

I leap to my feet and grab my gun. At the same time, somewhere from down the long winding corridor comes a strange sound, like a slamming door.

Molly looks at me.

Silently, I nod. Ryan and Zeke also leap up, their hands on their weapons. Emmanuel looks terrified.

"What's happening?" he asks.

I press my finger to my lips. "Be quiet. And put out the fire."

He does exactly as I say, rushing over and kicking the flames until there's nothing left but smoldering coal. In the pitch blackness, we all stand completely still, listening to the shuffling, pattering sounds coming from the other side of the castle.

I curse myself for having been so stupid as to leave the boat in view. We'd been so distracted by the storm we'd been thinking only of finding shelter. That lapse in judgment might have cost us dearly.

"Emmanuel," I whisper to the terrified boy, "we're going to try and get to our boat, okay? We'll get you out of here and head to safety."

I'm thinking of Nicolas and the Forest Dwellers' new survivors' colony. We can send Emmanuel in that direction. It would probably take little more than a day to reach on foot.

But Emmanuel is shaking his head. "I don't want to leave the castle," he says stubbornly. "This is my home."

"Not for long," I reply. "Listen. You hear that? Footsteps. There are people here. People who want to hurt you."

He frowns, suddenly angry. "You led them here," he accuses me.

There's nothing I can say to refute it. He's right.

"And that's why I'm going to do everything I can to keep you safe," I reply, sternly.

I feel someone move beside me in the darkness. Even without

being able to see, I can tell that it's Ryan.

"I'm sending Jack ahead," he whispers. "We can follow his route."

"Good idea," I reply.

I can just about make out Jack's white fur as he trots quietly across the large ballroom and out into the corridor.

"Come on," Ryan whispers.

We creep silently across the room, putting all our faith in Jack like he's a guide dog for the blind. We make it to the corridor and skirt along, our backs to the damp stone walls. After a tense few minutes, we emerge into the main chamber with the piano, staircase, and grandfather clock.

A stream of weak moonlight comes through the hole in the ceiling. Jack's only fifty paces away from the open door when he stops. His head darts up, picking up a sound that none of us can hear. Then he begins barking shrilly, as though instructing us to run, leave, get out.

Without a second's hesitation, we race forward, heading straight for the door. At the same time, shadows lurch out of the corridor.

Crazies. At least ten of them.

They race toward us, their faces melted, their deformed hands stretching out for us. I'm ready for them. I start shooting before anyone else has even had a chance to draw their weapon. My first shot is so precise it only just skims past Ryan's face before meeting its target.

Emmanuel screams and freezes on the spot. I have no choice but to grab him and start dragging him, making me unable to fire my weapon. I just pray the other three can cover me.

Ryan, Zeke, and Molly shoot their guns desperately at the crazies but none of the bullets find their destination. They're panicking too much. Finally, Molly gets herself together and manages to shoot one of the crazies dead. He falls directly in my and Emmanuel's path. Emmanuel trips over the corpse and goes flying across the slippery marble floor, right into another crazy. The deformed man snatches him up in his arms, ready to whisk him away. But there's no way I'm going to let that happen. This whole thing is my fault. Emmanuel was safe before we turned up. I won't let him die because of me.

I aim my gun up and blast the crazy right in the face.

Blood explodes all over the place and the crazy falls to the floor dead, releasing Emmanuel, who crumples into a heap, shivering, staring at the place where the crazy's face used to be.

"GET UP!" I cry at him. "MOVE!"

He drags himself to his feet and runs toward where Jack is barking by the door, ready to lead the boy to safety.

With Emmanuel safely out the way, I wheel and direct my gun at

the shadows, at the figures darting around in them. Molly's gun cracks out another bullet, hitting a crazy in the chest. She fires two more times, and he finally falls. Ryan and Zeke both fire on a second crazy and he collapses to his knees before falling face first onto the marble with his arms splayed either side of him. I turn my gun on the last standing crazy and fire. My bullet hits him right between the eyes. He pauses momentarily before falling to the ground.

Panting, blood-splattered, we look around at the fallen group of crazies. Ten of them lie dead on the floor. That was way too close for comfort, but we did it. We killed them all.

Suddenly, I hear the sound of Jack's barking coming from outside the castle. If Jack is barking, that means there's more danger. My mind immediately thinks of Emmanuel, who followed the pit bull outside. He's completely defenseless.

Ryan, Zeke, Molly, and I exchange a quick glance before rushing out of the castle doors. And that's when we see them. Through a gray sheet of rain, we take in the sight of more crazies. A whole gang of them—on our boat. The ones inside the castle were just an offshoot of this main group, a distraction used to give these crazies the opportunity to steal our boat. And there in the center sits Emmanuel. He's been completely bound in rope. His frantic gaze locks with mine.

"NO!" I scream.

The engine of our boat thrums and the black water churns as the propellers turn. The boat starts to move away, taking our weapons, food, and medical supplies with it.

Flooded with anger, drenched by rain, I raise my gun. But what can I do? I can't get a clear shot of the crazies driving the boat because Emmanuel is in the way. If I shoot it to sink it, that would be no help either. We'd lose everything, including Emmanuel, who wouldn't be able to swim to safety. There's nothing I can do. I'm completely defeated.

Suddenly, I feel something grab me from behind. I scream and thrash around frantically. Beside me, Molly, Ryan, and Zeke have all been grabbed as well. As I finally catch a glimpse behind me, I realize that the whole island is filled with crazies. There are at least fifty of them surrounding the castle. The ones in the boat were just a decoy. We're trapped. There's nothing we can do.

I'm certain I'm about to meet my death when the sudden blast of a shotgun splinters the air. Something whistles past my face and immediately the arms that were latched tightly around me release. The crazy who'd been holding me falls into the wet, muddy earth, dead, with a neat bullet hole in the side of his face.

I touch my cheek and feel warm blood mingling with the ice cold rain drops. The bullet grazed me. Whoever just fired that gun was a

millimeter from blasting my face off.

I don't have time to think about the fact I'm still alive or how. I dart forward with my gun, spin on the spot, and start shooting the crazies. I free Molly first, knowing full well that she's a better shot than either of the guys. She looks completely startled as she wriggles free from the dead crazy who'd been holding her. She's soaking wet from the rain. Her uniform weighs her down and her ginger hair is plastered to her head.

"Save Emmanuel!" I shout at her.

She nods and splashes through the muddy puddles as she races toward the jetty, where the small boat is rapidly disappearing across the water. It's only then that I notice the other boat, the one that's coming toward us, the one containing three silhouettes, one of whom is holding a gun.

Out the corner of my eye I have time to see the silhouetted figure shoot his gun. Again, the bullet just skims me. For a second, I wonder if I was the intended target. But then a dead crazy flops to my feet and I realize I'd been mere seconds from being attacked by him. Whoever it is in that boat, they're trying to help us.

I have no time to think about the mysterious people who are helping us; I have to focus on freeing Zeke and Ryan, on neutralizing the threat. I turn back and see that Jack is attacking the crazy holding Ryan, gnashing with his jaws. The crazy tries kicking him off but it's no use. He finally lets go of Ryan and falls down in the mud.

Ryan, now free, grabs his gun and fires a vengeful bullet straight into the man's head. When he looks up at me, his jaw is set firmly. The expression on his face chills me to the bone much more than the pounding rain that soaks me. It's a murderous look.

As though fueled by revenge, Ryan grabs his gun and begins firing round after round at the crazies. They begin dropping to the rain-drenched ground, falling face first into the mud and dying undignified deaths. My heart pounds as I fire too, and kill the crazy holding Zeke.

Now that there are three of us on the island shooting the crazies, plus the mysterious stranger on the approaching boat, the crazies begin to fall more quickly. Soon there's only a handful left, the ones that were clever enough to take cover behind walls and trees. Ryan stalks over to one, seemingly without any recognition of the danger he's in by exposing himself, and fires at the crazy, killing him at point-blank range.

With Ryan on his murderous rampage and Zeke covering him, I decide to help out Molly. I can hear her gun firing as she tries to kill the crazies taking away Emmanuel, and every time she pauses to lock and load, she curses, and I know she's having no luck. I race to her

side but it's no use. Our boat and Emmanuel are far away. There's no chance of rescuing them now.

Suddenly, the sound of gunfire ceases. I glance behind me and realize that Ryan has shot the last of the crazies. We did it. But we lost Emmanuel and our boat containing all our supplies. It hardly feels like a victory.

For the first time, I let myself fully look at the other boat, the one with the strangers who were helping us. It's a boat just like the one we'd just lost, but smaller. A sailboat, its small engine is nonetheless whining as it's being driven like a motorboat. Even in the gloomy moonlight, and obscured by the sheet of pelting rain, I can tell that they are not strangers at all. The three figures on the boat are in fact so recognizable to me as to be family.

It's Bree, Charlie, and, holding the gun, the gun that saved my life twice in the last five minutes, Ben.

* * *

I stare at them as if I've seen a ghost. The small boat reaches the jetty and Jack bounds over. Penelope leaps ashore and the two dogs race around in circles, happy to be reunited.

The rest of us just stand completely still, too shocked to move.

"Is that…" Molly begins.

"Yes," I reply.

Suddenly, I find my feet. I race toward them full speed through the squelchy mud, not caring about it splattering all over my clothes. When I reach them, the kids grab hold of me and pull me into an embrace. I'm filled with relief.

"Bree," I stammer, staring into my sister's face cupped between my hands. "You came."

She nods. "I'm sorry. I should never have let you go like that. Without saying goodbye."

"Shh," I say, hushing her. "No sorries. If anyone's sorry it should be me. We're together now, and that's all that matters."

I pull her into my arms again and hold on tightly, while Charlie's arms circle tightly around my waist.

"You're bleeding, Brooke," he says, sounding worried for me.

"I'm fine," I say, touching my wound as I remember the bullet that whizzed past my cheek and saved my life, the bullet that was shot by Ben.

I look over the children's huddled figures at Ben, who is standing a few paces back from the rest of us.

"How did you…" I begin, a million questions entering my mind,

not even knowing what to say next.

"We begged the Commander for another boat," Ben said. "We had a feeling you might need us."

I smile.

"Nice shot," I say, knowing full well that it's the first he's made since that day at the outpost when his PTSD stopped him dead in his tracks.

Ben looks at me intently with his soulful blue eyes. "I don't know how," he says. "But when I saw that you were in danger I could just suddenly shoot again." He sounds confused, like he doesn't fully understand it himself.

"Well, I'm glad," I say. "And I'm glad you came."

"Me too," he says quietly.

Just then, the other three come over. Everyone hugs, shakes hands, pats each other on the back. But my joy and relief are only short-lived as I remember Emmanuel and our boat.

"What do we do now?" I say.

We all look at Ben's boat. It's even smaller than the one the Commander gave us, and there's no way we'll fit comfortably in there. And they don't have any supplies or weapons to speak of.

But we have no choice. The seven of us huddle into the boat, the two dogs squeezing in too. It might be cramped but the important thing is that we're all together. Everyone I love is in this boat. Everyone but one person… Dad.

"I'm coming, Dad," I whisper under my breath.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The boat, its engine off, now at full sail, sways and lurches in the water as Zeke consults the map.

"We've reached Lake Ontario," he announces.

I look out, as do the others, shocked by the sight ahead. It looks more like an ocean. The waves are huge and rock our overcrowded boat violently. I cling on for dear life, praying that after surviving an attack from crazies we don't meet our doom in the water. I would hate to drown like Logan.

The rain is still pounding and we're all completely soaked and shivering. But we need to keep going, plowing onward, putting as much distance between us and the crazies as possible.

The entire way I kept my eyes peeled for the crazies, for our old boat, for Emmanuel, desperate to save him. But to my horror and guilt, they were nowhere to be found.

Suddenly, a sound dawns on me, one that had been nudging at my consciousness and growing louder with each minute.

"Uh-oh," Zeke says. "Looks like danger ahead."

I huddle forward and peer at the map. He's pointing to something. I read *Niagara Falls*.

"Oh," I say, apprehensively.

That was the sound: rushing water, distant, yet growing closer.

It's a testament to the dangers of the cities that the Commander and General Reece thought it would be safer to direct us via Niagara Falls than have us go by foot for any significant portion of the journey.

"What do we do?" Ryan asks.

"It's the only way to get into Lake Erie," I reply. "Toledo is on its west bank. We'll just have to be careful."

The tension is unbearable. Not only do we have poor weather and overcrowding to contend with, but now we have to maneuver past a waterfall. I feel Bree's small, cold hand slip into mine.

"It will be okay," I say. Then I look up at Ryan, who is steering the boat. "Won't it?"

He nods grimly, his expression not exactly filling me with confidence.

"We don't have much gas," Ryan adds. "And we'll need as much power as possible to counteract the force of the falls, to get us to shore before we go over."

"Use it all if you have to," I tell him. "We can sail the rest of the way. Just don't let us go over."

He turns back to the tiller, his features transforming into

complete concentration. I hold Bree close to me and whisper a silent prayer under my breath. She nuzzles her head into my chest and squeezes her eyes shut. Penelope sits in her lap, shivering from the rain.

The boat chugs along, churning up water as we go. Ryan steers us smoothly along, trying not to fight the power of the water while also using it to push us forward. I can hear the engine struggling in the choppy water, and then a new noise makes me even tenser. It's the rising sound of the waterfall, of thousands of liters of water plummeting down a cliff face, crashing on the rocks. And we're heading right toward it.

I grip the sides of the boat even tighter. Beside me, Molly is doing the same. Zeke has practically turned green. In complete contrast to the others, Ben sits serenely, his gaze locked on me. I can't help but feel calmed by his presence. We've gone through so much together and are still standing; it's almost like he's a good-luck talisman. He nods as if to say, "We've got this. We've been through worse." Despite my fear, I find myself smiling back at him.

The boat carries on forward and the sound of the waterfall grows even louder. The amount of water spray kicked up by the power of it is immense. It drenches us as much as the rain.

The sound and feel of the engine beneath me changes. I look over to Ryan and see that he's giving the boat more power. And that means that the pull of the waterfall is starting to take effect. I can't help but visualize our little boat being sucked into the stream and splintering to a thousand pieces on the rocks on the way down.

I catch my first glimpse of the waterfall's edge. How strange to think of all the tourists who gathered here and took tour boats across the water. They will all be dead now, all those people whose lives consisted of day trips to beauty spots. They could never have imagined as they stood here looking at the breathtaking sight of nature at its finest that in a few hundred years our species would have almost entirely annihilated itself.

I push the thoughts from my mind and keep my gaze on the lip of the waterfall as we skim past it. I feel like every muscle in my body has tensed up and that I've turned to rock. I've never been at someone's mercy like this. It's almost unbearable. Usually when I'm in danger I know I can fight and get myself out of it. Now, I have nothing to do but hope and wish and pray we make it out the other side.

The end of the waterfall's rim is just in sight.

And then a strange *putt-putt-putt* noise makes me frown. I look at Ryan. His expression instantly tells me it is bad news.

"The engine," he says. "We're running out of gas."

As soon as he says it, the whirring of the propeller starts to slow.

Instantly, the power of the waterfall can be felt beneath us. The boat starts to be pulled toward it by the force.

"ROW!" I scream. "EVERYONE! NOW!"

We grab the oars from beneath the seats and frantically begin rowing. My arms ache with the power of my movements. I grit my teeth with determination and put everything I've got into forcing the boat away from the waterfall's edge. But despite all our strength, we continue to veer closer and closer to the rim.

There's just five meters or so to push through before we clear the edge. The engine hasn't died yet and Ryan's able to keep it turning over, giving us just a fraction more power.

"Head for the shore!" I cry to Ryan.

With the combined efforts of all of us, and what little power we have left in the engine, we manage to just reach the shore.

I heave a sigh of relief, as do the others, all of us drenched.

The second we touch land, I leap off and extend my hand to Bree. She grabs it and I haul her up onto the solid land. I heave Charlie out next. Jack and Penelope leap up on their own, and Molly, Ben, and Zeke are able to heave themselves out of the boat and onto the land. Together we grab the ropes and hold on for dear life as Ryan makes the leap out and onto land.

"Now what?" Molly cries, fighting against the power of the boat.

"Now we pull the boat onto land," I shout back.

She gives me a look like she's less than thrilled, but she doesn't argue. Zeke, Molly, Ben, Ryan, and I begin heaving with all our strength. After rowing for so long, my arm muscles scream in pain. But I keep pulling. Finally, we edge the boat out of the water and onto the strip of land.

I fall back, exhausted, aching, relieved. We're still alive. I can hardly believe it.

"That was a close call," I say to the gray, drizzly sky.

Ben's face appears above me. "Come on," he says, extending his hand to me.

I take it and let him pull me to my feet, overwhelmed once again by the mere sight of him. Ryan must notice the way I look at him because he shoots a glare my way. He's probably thinking that he was the one who just saved all our lives, that he was the one who came with me in the first place, and yet here I am swooning over Ben, the boy who barely spoke to me for six months and let me head off alone. I know it's not fair, but I don't fully understand my feelings toward either of them.

Zeke pulls out the map the Commander gave us.

"We should walk the boat to Lake Erie," he says. "There's three more waterfalls to get past in this part of the lake. We won't have

enough gas to power past them all."

He's right. Once in Lake Erie, we'll be able to sail all the way to Toledo, but we won't have the strength to pass any more rapids.

Despite our complete exhaustion, no one is prepared to take a break, especially when we're on land and completely exposed. We all feel much more comfortable on the water where the chances of crazy and slaverunner attacks are closer to nil. Plus, we're nearing Buffalo, which was a densely populated city before the war. If there's going to be any slaverunner activity in these parts, that's where we're likely to find it.

We trudge along the road, weary, shivering, soaked to the bone. A rest would be welcome around about now, but we have to keep going. Apart from the kids, we all take it in turns carrying the boat. It's heavy, and what with our muscles already aching, it starts to really slow us down.

After an hour of walking, I'm completely spent. I stumble, my legs giving out beneath me.

"We can't stop here," Zeke says. "Buffalo is just ahead."

He nods toward the horizon, where a collection of skyscrapers and tall buildings make up the skyline. I drag myself to my feet and begin trudging along again. To make matters worse, my stomach feels completely hollow. We lost all of our provisions when the crazies stole our boat. We're going to have to hunt sometime soon before we all collapse from exhaustion. But I keep telling myself "not yet." Once we've made it past Buffalo and are back in the water, then I can start worrying about things like sleep and sustenance.

The city looms up ahead of us. I get an unpleasant feeling in the pit of my stomach. But it's not the feeling that tells me danger lurks nearby, it's a different feeling. It's the feeling of death. Of ruin. The entire city is empty, deserted. A once bustling metropolis has been left to decay because of a pointless war that killed its inhabitants.

Night is starting to fall, making stark shadows across the streets, turning the houses into skeletons. I shiver and draw my arms across my chest for protection.

"Looks like there's nothing to worry about here," Zeke says.

The abandoned city is good news. It means no slaverunners. But it makes me think dark, depressing, hopeless thoughts, and that is definitely not good. The sooner we get out of Buffalo the better.

"This way to get to the water," Zeke says, pointing to the dog-eared map.

"Here," I say, going up to Ryan. "I'll take the boat for the next stretch."

He swaps out with me. Then Ben comes over and swaps out with Molly. For the first time, Ben and I are walking together. We don't say

a word, we've never had much need to. Without him having to utter a single syllable, I can tell that the gesture was a symbolic one, one that says he won't leave me again, that we'll be walking side by side forevermore. The thought comforts me.

We get to the lake's edge and nudge the boat into the water.

I heave a sigh of relief, completely spent.

"Lake Erie," Zeke announces, like some kind of tour guide, as we begin to clamber on board. "Three hundred twenty miles to Toledo."

My legs shake from fatigue as I clamber aboard. The kids practically fall asleep the second they hit the deck.

"We'll need to take this in turns then," I say. "Get some sleep in shifts. Ryan, why don't you sleep first since you steered us through Niagara Falls and all?"

I'm expecting to see his cocky smile at my quip but he just looks at me with pained, haunted eyes. It occurs to me that the last twenty-four hours have probably been the most traumatic in his life. He's become a shell of himself. But he nods, accepting my urging.

"Just twenty minutes," he says. "Then wake me up."

I agree, though I have no intention of waking him for at least two hours. Zeke decides he'll take the first sleeping shift as well. Then I turn to Molly.

"Do you want to sleep on the first shift too?" I ask.

She looks from me to Ben with a curious look in her eye. I can tell she doesn't think it's a great idea for me and Ben to be left alone together, and I wonder if it's because she doesn't yet trust him or because she is suspicious of there being something between us and feels loyalty to Ryan. Whatever it is, she finally agrees to sleep.

Everyone apart from Ben and me curls up on the floor of the boat, leaving the two of us to set the sails and steer out into the expanse of water.

We head southwest, keeping the banks in our sight line at all times.

I look over at Ben. He looks stunning in the dawn light.

"I'm glad you're here," I tell him, speaking quietly so as not to wake anyone up. "I missed you."

"We were only apart for a few hours," he replies.

"That's not what I mean."

He looks down, embarrassed, as it dawns on him that I'm referring to our time in Fort Noix, and the way he cut me out of his life.

"Where did you go?" I ask him. "Why didn't you speak to me for six months?"

He can hardly meet my eye. "I didn't want you to know how weak I'd become."

I frown. “And why would that matter to me? You’re my friend, Ben, I care for you no matter what.”

“That’s just it,” he replies. “I’m your friend. Your weak, sensitive friend. Rather than the sort of strong, confident guy who could one day become more than your friend.” His eyes skim over Ryan’s sleeping form.

“Are you telling me you ignored me for six months because you’re jealous of Ryan?” I’m almost too angry to speak.

“It’s not just Ryan,” Ben says. “It’s Logan too. The second we reached Fort Noix you never spoke of him again. Never even said his name. You were in love with him, weren’t you?” His eyes burn into me.

“I don’t know,” I say, squirming.

“Well, I do,” Ben says. “You were. And even after he died I still wasn’t good enough for you.”

“Ben,” I say, pained. It hurts to hear him talk like this, especially when it couldn’t be further from the truth. I do have feelings for Ben, I just don’t fully understand them.

“You have a type,” Ben adds. “Strong. Confident. Accomplished.”

“You’re all those things,” I reply, a little exasperated.

He just shakes his head. “It doesn’t matter. I know my place now, Brooke. Because you see, I tried to let you go and it didn’t work. I came running straight after you. My place is beside you. Whether you want me there or not.”

“I do want you there,” I say. “Always.”

Ben turns his face from me and looks out over the sparkling water. He doesn’t believe me and my heart deflates. I wish I was better with words, and that I could make him see how much it means to me that he’s here. But I don’t get the chance because Molly stirs.

“Brooke,” she whispers. “Why don’t I take this shift?”

It occurs to me then that she’s heard everything, that she hasn’t slept a wink. Like a good friend, she’s trying to protect me from my pain.

“Thanks,” I say. “I could do with the sleep.”

As we swap places, she squeezes my arm, as if to tell me that everything will be all right.

“Good night, Ben,” I say.

He doesn’t say anything back.

* * *

I’m woken by a jolt. I sit up sharply, and realize it’s morning. I must have slept all night. No one woke me to take another shift.

I drag myself to sitting and look around. The boat is lurching violently.

"What's happening?" I shout.

Above me, Zeke, Molly, and Ryan are fighting with the sail.

"Storm!" Zeke shouts down.

I finally make it to my feet. The water is dark, churning violently. Waves several meters high rise up, dragging our little boat helplessly along with them. My stomach turns as we plummet down the side of a wave.

"I'm scared!" Bree cries.

I look back at her clutching the sides of the boat. She looks terrified, as does Charlie.

"It's going to be okay," I tell them hurriedly. "We can handle it."

I help the others with the ropes and sails. There's very little we can do, though, other than sit it out. We're at the mercy of the water and can only pray that it doesn't capsize us.

The sensation is horrible, like being on a terrifying rollercoaster or an airplane in turbulence. Molly loses her footing and gets catapulted across the boat. Zeke grabs her just in time to stop her falling overboard.

"Everyone hold on tight!" I cry, reaching for my friends.

We huddle together, keeping vigilant of any danger as our little boat is buffeted by the waves and thrown around. Even though my stomach is empty, I still feel like I could throw up.

The dogs whimper as we lurch sideways. Bree begins to cry. For the first time I wonder if we made the right call taking the river route. If Buffalo was completely deserted, maybe all the big cities along the lake's edge are deserted as well. But just as I'm thinking it, I catch sight of a city on the banks, and what I see chills me to my core.

"Zeke!" I cry as the boat bobs up and back down again. "Where are we?"

"Must be Cleveland," he replies.

"Do you see it?" I shout to Ben, my eyes transfixed on the city that the lake seems to be pushing us toward.

"I see it," he replies.

There, in the distance, looming up in the middle of bombed out buildings, is the unmistakable outline of an arena.

"We have to MOVE!" I cry. "There are slaverunners in that city. If they see us, we're dead."

I remember the powerful speedboats the slaverunners chased us with before. Our little boat will be nothing against them. If we're spotted, we'll be captured in a matter of minutes.

"There's nothing we can do!" Ryan shouts back as the boat makes another huge push up, followed by a stomach-churning plummet

down.

I know he's right but I just can't accept it. There must be something we can do to put a bit more distance between us and the city crawling with slaverunners. We seem to be forced closer to the banks. From here, I can even make out the sight of the bright yellow school buses that are used to transport young girls to the sex trade. We're far too close for comfort.

"Is there any gas at all?" I cry to Molly, who's sitting by the engine throttle.

She tries it, and to my relief, the engine sputters alive.

"There must be a tiny bit left," Ryan says.

"Good. Then use it!"

He powers the boat forward, heading away from the coast and farther into the middle of the lake. The waves here seem even stronger, and with the forward motion of the boat as well, we seem to be bobbing up and down even more violently. Charlie begins retching in his hole at the bottom of the boat. Bree holds onto him to comfort him.

"Come on, Ryan," I urge, willing him to go faster, to get us out of sight of the dangerous city.

At last, the distance between us and Cleveland seems to grow. I can no longer make out the buses, and the tops of the buildings disappear over the horizon. The only thing that's left in my sightline is the roof of the huge arena.

Just as the waves begin to lessen, the engine of the boat finally splutters to death. We're sitting ducks again. Only at least this time we're nowhere near the dangerous city of Cleveland. Instead, we're closer now to the northern bank of Lake Erie. From here we can see the derelict city of Detroit. It's another grand city reduced to nothing more than rubble. I shiver, desperate to make it to Toledo soon and put the danger and horror of mass destruction behind us.

But I have a feeling it's only just beginning.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"So this is Toledo," I say, looking around at the decaying harbor we've landed in.

Finally, we touch the shore and disembark. It feels strange to be back on solid ground after so long at sea. I am not sure whether I am relieved to be off the violent waters, or anxious to be back on dry land.

I look around. Toledo is more or less intact, but completely empty. It's a ghost town, eerie in the pale morning light. The place is so thoroughly deserted, I can't help but think slaverunners must have been through here, picking off all the survivors. The thought makes me shudder.

Zeke consults the map. "It's this way," he says, pointing ahead.

We all stop and turn and look at the boat. I have mixed feelings, knowing we are abandoning it. I can only hope and pray we find the train soon. And I can't help but feel a sense of victory that we made it this far by water.

We turn and walk. We trek down a narrow road, tall trees growing on either side. There are young tree saplings that have clearly grown since the war because they look healthy and untamed. But the road itself has been ravaged by bombs. Every few steps we pass another crater, another burnt out car, and bits of twisted metal all over the asphalt from an explosion that ripped vehicles right apart from its force. Nature has attempted to reclaim the road. Tufts of grass spring out of cracks, and vines twist around street signs, hydrants, and lamps.

After a while, we turn onto a main road. Here there are houses dotted either side of the road, the wood siding rotting and falling off in places, their front gardens completely overgrown. Some of the houses have endured fires and have huge black smoke marks above the grubby windows. Others look almost completely intact, the bombs that fell here missing their properties by mere feet.

We pass a gas station, with a raggedy American flag still blowing in the wind. There are rusted trucks sitting in the parking lot, abandoned. We check them all for gas, to see whether we can use them to reach our destination more quickly, but they've all already been siphoned. It's a sign that people lived around here after the war long enough to scavenge, but there's no one to be seen now. No sign that anyone's set foot on this road, in this part of America, for years and years and years.

Beyond exhausted, we trek all day. Finally, night begins closing in. We're all famished. The only upside is that there have been no

more attacks from crazies, and no sightings of wild animals, despite the Toledo zoo being just a few blocks from where we're heading. I'll never forget the time I came face to face with a wild lion that had broken free from Central Park Zoo. It's an experience I hope never to repeat.

The air is heavy with dust. The houses become more dense, as does the destruction. There are whole streets where the front parts of the buildings have been blown off, like the door to a doll's house being taken off and exposing the whole house inside. Each house tells the same story: of everything of worth being looted, of the building being left in disrepair with wallpaper peeling from the walls, plaster and wiring falling from the ceiling, the stairs caved in, of nature trying to reclaim what was taken from it. Rats have nested in the old family homes, as have birds.

I'm on even greater alert here than before. Anywhere that was once more populated is more dangerous. Not only are there more places to hide but there's more chance that people survived the war and got left behind. At least there's no sign of slaverunner activity. I'm certain that this area must have been amongst the first to be raided by the slaverunners. They probably haven't been here for years now, discarding the place after taking what they needed, leaving a ghost town in their wake.

Finally, I see the huge rust-colored bridge where the train tracks pass over the roads. For the first time in a long time, I let a flicker of hope lift my spirits. I even find enough strength in my limbs to run.

"Guys, come on, this way," I call to the others.

With tired, heavy footsteps, we dash across the last bit of open land and into the train yard. But the moment we get a clear view of the station and tracks, my stomach sinks with disappointment. The whole place is destroyed. Explosions have melted the metal of the tracks and twisted them up at strange angles. The train cars that were on the tracks must have been blasted off, because they lie on their sides, scattered across the yard.

And of course, there is no coal.

They've all been looted.

I'm devastated by the sight I see before me. The Commander's historic map was right, it led us on the right path to the right place, but we're here years too late. The map has led us to a place that's been completely obliterated. The only things still standing are the bridge across the road and the small metal station house.

Molly is the first to speak.

"Now what?"

It's a good question and one I can't answer. When we left Fort Noix, there was no plan B.

“We’ll need to find another vehicle,” I say.

“Way to state the obvious,” Molly says. “But we’ve been checking pretty much every car we’ve passed. There’s nothing.”

I really don’t appreciate her attitude right now.

“We can’t stand here,” Ben says.

He’s right. Darkness is crowding in on us, and that means danger is getting ever closer. Slaverunners, crazies, escaped animals, if they wanted to attack, now would be the time to do it, while we’re all standing here in the middle of an open train yard.

I look back at the ragtag bunch of followers. Bree and Charlie are clasping hands with each other. They look completely exhausted, with dark circles under their eyes and downturned mouths. Molly appears to be fuming, but getting angry and hostile has always been her reaction to negative experiences. Ben looks frantic. Even Zeke, the only actual adult here, looks like a tired, vulnerable infant. Ryan’s the only one who looks like he has any fight left in him at all.

I realize then that they’re all looking to me. They need me to tell them what to do, to make the decisions, to lead them.

“Let’s head for the train station,” I say, agreeing with Ben. “We can hide out there until we figure out what to do.”

We begin walking past the rail yard toward the small station house. Zeke leads the way, zigzagging through the fallen train cars, assuming the position of leader just like he used to when we had our meetings. But leading a discussion around a table and leading a mission are two completely different things. He’s not being cautious enough, just plowing ahead. Some instinct tells me to reach for my gun.

All at once, there’s an almighty noise of screeching metal. Everyone freezes as one of the train carriages ahead of us appears to start moving. It rocks side to side, light glittering off the metal, and in the darkness, I can see movement coming from under it. Like a swarm of ants under an overturned log, crazies start crawling out of the train carriage.

I don’t have any time to think. I start to fire straightaway. Ryan takes up his firearm, his gunshots joining the cacophony of noise. Beside me, Ben and Molly start shooting too.

The crazies surge forward, charging at the closest target: Zeke.

“Run!” Molly shouts.

We run, jumping over bits of blown-up train carriage, dashing across the yard. The only place that offers any kind of protection in the near vicinity is the station house, and that means racing round the perimeter of the yard in a full circle. It’s impossible to go straight ahead because that’s where the mass is coming from.

Without question, everyone follows me.

“Don’t look back!” I shout.

Then I hear a scream, one that makes my bones turn to ice. It’s Bree.

I don’t even stop to think. I turn on the spot.

“Brooke! What are you doing?” Molly cries, coming up to me, trying to shove me on.

But it’s no use. I barge past her easily and run back to where Bree is right at the back of the group. The crazies are so close to her they’re barely an arm’s length away.

Like a relay race runner preparing to receive the baton, I stretch my hand back for her and get in a stance ready to run. She sees me and stretches her hand forward. The second her fingers make contact with me, I yank her forward, pulling her with me. We pelt across the yard, heading for the station house where the others have already made it.

“Run! Brooke, run!” they’re all screaming from the door.

I can hear the sound of hundreds of crazies’ footsteps pounding after me. There’s so many of them I can smell their odor, feel the heat coming from their skin. Bree stumbles as she runs beside me, but I won’t let her fall.

We’re almost there. Fifteen feet. Ten feet. Five feet.

Then we catapult in through the open door and collapse onto the ground. Ben slams the door shut behind us, locking it with bolts. We hear the sound of the crazies as they blast into the side of the building, thudding one after the other.

Bree and I sit up, panting. She clasps onto me just like she used to when it was just the two of us in the mountains. We hold each other close in the center of our group. Everyone’s huddled into the middle of the room, looking out at the windows, where the silhouettes of the crazies bob around, banging their fists against the glass.

We’re completely surrounded.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The sound of pounding is like a drum in my brain. The dogs are barking feverishly.

We're trapped in the station house. I'm still clutching Bree in the middle of the dark room, sitting on the dusty floorboards. My friends seem frozen with fear around me. The same thoughts must be running through all of our minds: this is the end, this is how we die.

The fear I'm feeling is so consuming, I don't even realize that Bree is trying to break free from my clasp.

"Brooke," she's saying. "Brooke, look, look there."

Finally I let her go and turn to see where she is pointing. She scrabbles up from me and rushes over to a small hatch in the ground. I have no idea how she managed to see it in the dim light, but the relief as I pull it open and see stairs leading down into blackness is all consuming.

"Quick," I shout at everyone.

Ryan is the first to rush over. He races down the ladder, disappearing into the blackness. Molly gestures for Bree and Charlie to go next, ushering them in, then dropping down after them. Zeke is quick to follow.

Ben appears, his gun drawn and pointing at the door as he edges backward.

"Brooke, go," he says. "I'll cover you."

But some sense of responsibility is stopping me from saving myself first. It would be like a captain abandoning a sinking ship.

"You first," I cry out. "Come on."

I grab him by the shirt and pull him toward the hole. Just as he starts descending, one of the windows smashes. I flinch at the noise and turn to see crazies climbing over one another in their haste to get to me.

"Brooke!" Ben screams up from the hole.

I clamber onto the ladder, pulling the heavy wooden trapdoor down with one hand and fumbling with my gun with the other. I get out four shots at the advancing crazies before disappearing into the hole and yanking the trapdoor firmly into place.

From below, the hands of my friends reach for me. I'm lifted clean off the ladder by Zeke and Ben, and set on the ground. Above us, the crazies pound on the trap door.

My heart beats wildly as I look around. Molly's lit her flashlight and is shining it around, lighting up the place. We're in a tunnel, stretching on as far as the eye can see. It seems like some kind of storage place, with wooden crates stacked haphazardly around. It's

made of brick and is dank, molded with mildew. It stinks of rat and death down here.

Though we have no idea where it is leading us, we have no choice to but to follow the tunnel. The crazies will get through the trapdoor sooner or later. Going forward is the only way to avoid certain death.

We run through the tunnel as fast as we can, our flashlights lighting the way, bouncing and making shadows dance all around us in a crazy flashing pattern. It's like we're in some kind of nightmare discotheque.

From the other end of the tunnel, the way we'd just come, we hear the sound of cracking wood, followed by thuds as the crazies drop through the trapdoor to the ground. Once again, the hunt is on. I can only pray that there isn't more danger at the other end of this tunnel.

I can hear the crazies' footsteps gaining on us. My whole body is tense, pumping with adrenaline. I don't want to die down here in this dark, smelly tunnel.

As my feet pound against the cement floor, I feel something brush past my leg. My first instinct is a rat, but it was far too big for that. It's then that I realize Jack is heading back the way we came, running straight for the crazies. Penelope is running right after him, eager to join the fight too. I turn my flashlight on them and see them both baring their fangs, aiming for the crazies' throats. The sight is so gruesome it turns my stomach. I'm also terrified for their safety. They're both so small and fragile in comparison to the crazies.

I fire off some rounds of ammunition to help out, but I know it's not enough. If I want to stop the crazies from pursuing us, I'll have to think of something drastic.

"Guys!" I shout ahead. "We need to create a blockade with the crates."

"We can't stop!" Zeke shouts back. "They're too close."

But I know we're not going to make it if we keep running. We still can't see the end of the tunnel. We don't even know what's at the end of it. It could be leading us to a brick wall for all we know.

Ignoring his warning, I start knocking the crates with my arm as I go. They tumble down to the ground, splintering and spilling their contents onto the floor. Coal. Stacks and stacks of it. Seeing it gives me my second burst of inspiration.

I keep knocking down the crates, hoping that the crazies will find it harder to reach us with the obstacles in the way. At the same time I rip a strip of cloth from my uniform, hold it between my teeth, and fumble in my bag for matches. Finally, I find them. I light the end of the fabric, stop, turn, and throw it into the strewn coal and splintered wood. The splinters act like kindling and the fire spreads quickly. But

it's too low. The heat might slow the crazies but it's not enough to stop them.

Jack and Penelope dart toward us, sprinting past the fire and back to the group. They've managed to cause a lot of damage between them, but there are still crazies standing and they're getting very close. I grab one of the crates and throw it with all my might at the fire.

The others finally realize what I'm doing. They all stop too, quickly building a waist-high barricade with spare crates. The fire catches, and at last we have a barrier. Some of the crazies run straight into it, setting themselves alight.

"Come on," I say. "Let's keep going."

We leave the flaming barricade behind us and sprint along the tunnel. Jack is right by my heel and I'm so grateful for his bravery back there. He slowed the crazies down long enough for me to collect my thoughts and come up with a plan.

Smoke is starting to thicken in the tunnel as more and more coal starts to smolder. It's thick, making it difficult to breathe. The kids start coughing.

"We have to get out of here!" I yell.

"I can see a ladder!" Zeke shouts from up ahead.

We all hurry toward him and see a rusty, half falling apart metal ladder screwed into the wall, leading up to a round metal cover. It's a manhole, presumably leading out to the streets of Toledo.

Zeke's up it quicker than I can blink, slamming his shoulder into the cover at the top. It opens and cold evening air blasts us. He disappears out the top, then his face reappears.

"Come on!" Zeke cries, holding his hand down.

We pass up Charlie and Bree. Molly starts climbing, with Penelope under one arm. The ladder groans under her weight. The screws in the wall seem loose and they rattle with every step she makes.

"Brooke," Ben says. "You're the lightest, you should go next."

I look from him to Ryan. I can't go up knowing one of them will be last, that the ladder might not hold out for one of them and send the other plunging to his death. But I don't get a choice, because Ryan suddenly sweeps me up in his arms and shoves me onto the first rung. He pushes from behind, and I have no choice but to climb.

I grab Zeke's outstretched hand and he yanks me up into the street through the hole. The cold air shocks me after the stuffy, stinking, smoky tunnel. I start coughing, and Bree runs over, flinging her arms around me. But it's not over yet. Ben and Ryan are still down there, down in that horrible, dark place.

Black, acrid smoke billows out the hole as I race over beside Zeke

and stretch my hand down. Jack is shoved into my arms by Ryan. I heave him out and plop him down behind me. He runs over to Penelope and Bree for some much needed pampering.

Ben is next. I help pull him from the hole. He's completely soot covered, his face streaked with black, looking like a miner emerging from the mines. But as he pops out the hole, the ladder screeches and disintegrates behind him.

"Ryan!" I scream, as twisted bits of metal fall down around him, clattering to the ground.

From the bottom of the hole, Ryan looks up at me, looking lost and terrified.

"Grab my hand!" I scream.

"No!" he shouts back. "I'm heavier than you. I'll just pull you in."

I turn to Zeke and Ben. "Hold my legs, I'm going in."

I don't give them a chance to protest. I fling myself forward into the hole and they grab me, pinning my legs against the asphalt. I'm hanging into the hole by my waist, stretching forward for Ryan. He's still a good few feet below me.

"Jump!" I shout.

The smoke is so thick now it's starting to obscure my view of him. For a second, I lose sight of him. My first fear is that he's passed out.

"Ryan!" I scream. "RYAN!"

Suddenly, he reappears, making the smoke swirl around him. He's got a crate. He coughs as he positions it on the ground, covering his face with his sleeve, then clambers onto it. It gives him just enough height to reach my hands. I grip him as hard as I can.

"Pull!" I shout at Zeke and Ben.

Molly comes over to help, and between the three of them, they heave me up with Ryan dangling from my arms. We get him through the hole then flop back against the ground. I take in a huge gasp of air, lying sprawled on my back, gazing up at the black sky.

My first instinct is to laugh. We made it. We're alive. But when I turn to Ryan, expecting to see his cocky smile, instead I see that his eyes are closed. He's not moving.

"No, no, no," I say, dragging myself onto my knees and crawling over to him.

I rest my head on his chest. It's not rising or falling. He's not breathing.

Everyone begins to realize what's happening. They crowd over, looking anxious and pale. The kids cling to each other, unable to look as I begin performing CPR on Ryan. Jack howls into the night, and Penelope joins in.

"Come on!" I shout as I pump down on Ryan's chest.

He's completely covered in black smoke. When I push my lips to

his they taste of coal. I will Ryan to breathe again. He can't leave me. Not now. I don't know what I'd do without him.

Suddenly, Ryan takes a sharp intake of breath. He's breathing again, but he's still unconscious.

I sit back on my heels, feeling overwhelmed. What are we supposed to do now? We're in the middle of the street, completely exposed. We don't have the train anymore, and Ryan's out cold.

"We need to find shelter," Molly says, taking me by the arm and leading me to my feet. "In case there are any crazies left alive around here."

"Shelter where?" I cry, glancing around at the derelict buildings. None of them seem to offer adequate protection; they're all falling apart.

Just then, I realize the dogs have disappeared. Once again, they've hurried off, sniffing the air, searching for danger on our behalf. Then from somewhere far away, Jack starts barking and Penelope joins in with her high-pitched yapping.

"I think the dogs might have found somewhere," Molly replies. "Come on."

She takes my hand, not wanting to let me go, even when I pull back to try and get Ryan. So I let her lead me away in the direction of Jack's and Penelope's barks, while Ben and Zeke carry Ryan's unconscious body.

Penelope and Jack lead us all down a road that runs parallel to the train tracks. Up ahead is a strange-looking building that looks like it might have been some kind of power station once upon a time. It's made of a series of buildings like silos. Beside them is a pyramid-shaped building that is completely rusted. There are no windows and the only way in is up a steep, narrow ladder. I'm so glad the dogs managed to find this place; it will certainly offer us protection for the night. With only one way in, we'll be able to guard the door.

"Come on," I say, scaling the ladder.

I push open the door at the top and step inside the strange building. I realize then that it's not a power plant at all, but an enormous grain store. I've never seen anything like it before. Zeke, Ben, and Molly manage to carry Ryan up the steep stairs and into the grain store. Bree and Charlie come inside last. Zeke slams the door shut, plunging us into darkness. Then we all sink to the floor, exhausted.

I help settle Ryan into a comfortable position and wipe the soot from his face. He's still unconscious and the sight terrifies me.

"I think a few of us should go back to get the boat from the harbor," I say to the group.

"Why?" Molly questions me.

“Because the river runs all the way to Indiana and we know we’re safest on the water.”

Zeke consults the map. “She’s right. The Maumee River would take us on for miles but it goes through some built-up areas.” He points to where the river diverges at a place called Grand Rapids, heading due south almost all the way through Ohio. “This river would avoid all the large towns.”

“I don’t want you to leave, Brooke,” Bree says, her bottom lip quivering. “And what about Ryan? What if he wakes up while you’re gone?”

“She’s right,” Ben says. “We shouldn’t split up. Not while there might still be crazies out there.”

“Well then what’s your plan?” I say with a harsh tone.

“How about,” Molly says, acting as the peacemaker, “we all get some sleep? Eat some food? Talk about this in the morning?”

I shake my head. “We need to have a plan.”

“And we will,” she says sternly. “Tomorrow. The kids need to rest.”

She gestures toward Bree and Charlie. They both look terrified and exhausted and I know Molly’s warning me to calm down, to not look so desperate and frantic in front of them. But I can’t help it. I can’t bear the thought of not knowing where we’re heading next, not knowing what the next step of the plan is. We were supposed to be on a coal train right now, hurtling through the open countryside, not cooped up in a grain store.

“No,” I snap back. “Tonight. We’ll work out what we’re doing. As soon as Ryan’s awake, we leave.”

Molly narrows her eyes. She doesn’t appreciate my attitude or being bossed around by me. But I feel like I’m losing my mind right now. Plotting our next steps is the only thing that will stop me from worrying.

“You know what, fine,” she says gruffly. “Since none of my opinions seem to matter, I’m going to go and see if there’s anything edible in this place. You guys sit around talking in circles.”

She stomps off. I feel bad for making her annoyed, but she has no idea how much danger we’re in, in the middle of nowhere, completely off course. The quicker we plan our escape route the better.

Zeke spreads the map out on the floor and Ben and I peer over it.

“Do you really want to go all the way back for the boat?” Ben asks.

“What other option do we have?” I reply. “It’s our only transportation. We can’t get to Texas by foot.”

“She’s right,” Zeke replies. “The boat is integral here. We could even head all the way west then row it down the Mississippi.”

“But that would mean going via Chicago,” Ben says. “There’s bound to be an arena there. And that’s not to mention how far we’d have to carry the damn boat in the first place.”

“Do you have a better idea?” Zeke asks.

Ben shrugs. “I don’t know if it’s better or not, but I think we should leave the boat behind. The chances of us finding one at the other end are pretty high, wouldn’t you say? And it would mean we weren’t being slowed down the whole time by carrying the boat.”

I’m about to launch into another argument when I suddenly hear a shrill scream.

“Molly!” I cry.

Jack and Penelope bound off into the darkness, ready to play the heroes again. We stand, prepared to follow them.

“Stay here!” I cry at Bree and Charlie. “Look after Ryan, okay?”

Then we run, Zeke first, then me, then Ben. The metal grating clangs underfoot as we hurry after Jack and Penelope.

“MOLLY?” I cry, but there’s no response.

I’m terrified for my friend. What could have happened to her? Did she fall over one of the balconies and hurt herself? Was she attacked? If so, by who, or what?

I can see Jack and Penelope draw to a halt up ahead, but I can’t see Molly at all. We race toward the dogs and see why they’ve stopped. There’s a large door that’s sealed shut. The dogs scratch at it, whining.

“She must be in there,” I say.

Zeke and Ben start ramming their shoulders against the door. I join in too, and before long, we manage to pry it open just a little.

“Molly?” I shout through the gap. “Where are you?”

Again, there’s no response. We manage to make a gap just big enough for Penelope to get through.

“Please find her,” I tell the one-eyed Chihuahua.

The little dog tips its head to the side as though she understands what I’m asking of her, then disappears through the gap.

“She’ll be okay,” Ben says, wrapping an arm around my shoulder. “Penelope will find her.”

I fold into him, remembering how safe and comforted I feel in his arms.

Finally, we hear Penelope’s familiar *yap-yap-yap*. She leaps back through the hole, tail wagging, and a moment later, the door creaks open, and there stands Molly.

“Oh God,” I cry, flying into her arms. “I thought something terrible had happened to you.”

But that’s when I realize she’s not moving, not reciprocating the hug. I open my eyes and discover that I’m starting straight down the

barrel of a gun.

I jerk back and hold my hands in a truce position. As I move away from the door, I catch sight of Molly's captor. He's a young guy, maybe nineteen years old, with a guarded expression. One of his arms is tight around Molly, the other clutches the gun, pointing it at us.

"Who are you?" he demands.

"Just survivors," I say. "Just people like you."

He glares at me, untrusting.

"Why are you here?" he snaps. "No one's been in Toledo for years. Why did you come here?"

"Why don't you put the gun down so we can talk properly?" I say.

"No way," he says, shaking his head. "Tell me why you're here."

"We're trying to get to Texas," I reply. "To an army camp there. We were supposed to take the train all the way down but the tracks were damaged and we were attacked by crazies."

He pauses and a little flicker of interest crosses his face.

"An army camp?" he says.

I feel like I might be getting somewhere. The mention of the military camp has piqued his interest.

"Yes. We received a radio message from a survivors' camp. A military one. We're going to check it out."

He studies my face as though trying to work out if I'm telling the truth or not.

"I'm Brooke," I continue, trying to lure him into security so he'll put the gun down. I point to each of the guys behind me. "Ben. Zeke. And that's Molly." I point at my friend, who is trembling, the gun poised at her temple. "I'm also here with my little sister, Bree, her friend Charlie, and there's one more of us, Ryan. He's unconscious. Then there's Jack the pit bull and Penelope the Chihuahua, who you've already met. And that's it. That's everyone. You don't have any reason to be afraid of us. We just wanted somewhere to shelter until Ryan wakes up, then we'll be off."

"You're really going to Texas?" he asks, his tone closer to curiosity than aggression. But his eyes are still narrowed, telling me he's not quite sure if he can trust me.

"Yes," I reply.

"What if…" he begins, then pauses. I can tell he's hesitating, deliberating. "What if I told you I know the best way to get to Texas from here? Would you let me come with you?"

I can feel Zeke and Ben tensing behind me. We don't know this guy. All we know about him so far is that he has a gun and he's pointing it at Molly's head.

"I would," I say, trying to sound as honest as possible. "The bigger the group, the stronger we'll be. Survivors need to stick

together."

He narrows his eyes. "How can I trust you?"

I shrug. "You just have to make that leap of faith."

There's a long moment of stillness. Everyone holds their breath. Molly's eyes are squeezed tight. Her skin is drained of all color.

Then suddenly, the boy releases her. She flies forward into my arms. I grab her trembling body and hold her tightly, exhaling all the tension I'd been trying to hide from the boy.

Everyone's relief is palpable.

"I'm Stephan," the boy says, still looking guarded but showing no guilt or shame at all for having held Molly hostage.

"Nice to meet you, Stephan," I say, trying to sound cordial rather than angry.

I hold out my hand for him to shake. But as his gaze darts down to my outstretched hand, I turn it into a fist and slam it under his chin. It knocks him out cold.

His gun clatters to the floor. I grab it and stash it in my belt. Everyone stares at me, open-mouthed.

"What?" I say defensively. "He deserved it."

No one argues with me.

"You'd better tie him up before he comes to," I tell Zeke.

"I'll go and raid his food supply," Ben adds.

"Good idea."

I loop my arm through Molly's and begin leading her back to the others. She's still trembling.

"So you were just lying when you said Stephan could come with us?" she asks.

"Oh no, he can come with us if he wants," I say with shrug.

"Then why did you punch him?!"

"I just felt the need to put him in his place. No one points a gun at my best friend's head."

Molly locks her green eyes on me.

"Thank you, Brooke," she says under her breath. "And I'm really sorry about our argument."

"It's okay," I say. "Already forgotten."

Molly and I have never been into mushy displays of affection. It makes me uncomfortable to talk like this. Thankfully, we've reached the others and Bree runs up to me.

"Where have you been for so long?" she cries.

"We found a survivor," I reply.

Bree frowns. "You did? Where?"

"Oh, Zeke's just tying him up."

Her frown deepens. But before she gets a chance to fire another question at me, I'm distracted by a noise that comes from behind her.

I look over and see that Ryan is stirring. He's waking up. Molly loosens her grip on my arm and gives me a little shove, as if to say, "Go to him."

Quietly, I head to where Ryan is starting to bring himself up to a sitting position. He looks disorientated, and his cropped hair is still filled with soot. He manages to prop himself up against the wall, and hunches his knees to his chest.

"Brooke," he says when he sees me approaching. "What happened?"

I crouch down beside him and put my hand gently on his shoulder. "Nothing happened. You're safe."

He shakes his head. "No. No. Something bad happened. I died, didn't I?"

I falter, unsure as to how much I should really tell him. "You stopped breathing," I explain. "But it was just for a little bit."

"It being for a little bit doesn't make it any better."

I look away. My voice is quieter. "No, I suppose not."

"Sorry," he says. "I didn't mean…" He pauses, frowns, stares at me intently. "You brought me back to life, didn't you?"

I can feel the emotion lodging in my throat. The fear when I'd thought I'd lost him. The panic. The utter relief when he came back to me.

I nod, slowly.

Ryan looks down at his lap, frowning as though some deep thoughts are consuming him. Then he looks up at me again, leans forward, and quickly kisses me.

I'm completely taken aback. It was the last thing I was expecting him to do. But it felt wonderful, like electricity in my body.

The pleasant sensation doesn't last long, though, because I'm suddenly hit by a pang of guilt. Ben. Ryan. I don't know what I want or how I feel.

"It's okay," he says, studying my expression. "I'm not expecting anything from you. This world is too insane for relationships or dating. I just wanted to do something a normal eighteen-year-old guy would do, you know? Just in case I die properly next time."

I let out a small laugh and smile shyly. "Okay."

Just then, Zeke and Ben return with Stephan. He has a huge bruise from where I punched him, and looks incredibly angry. They're carrying a box filled with cans of food. At last, we'll be able to eat. Molly looks at Stephan coolly, as if to warn him that she has neither forgotten nor forgiven the gun incident.

"You must be the survivor," Bree says with a friendly smile.

Stephan gives her a moody look. "That's me."

"Well, thanks for letting us stay here," she adds, brightly. "We

appreciate your hospitality."

Stephan touches his jaw and winces. "I didn't exactly have much choice."

"Come on," I say, peering into the box filled with can of beans and fruit. "Let's eat."

We gorge ourselves on the provisions, and as we do, we look over our map again, plotting out our route. Between mouthfuls of canned peaches, I look at Stephan.

"You said you knew a good route to Texas," I say. "So, tell us."

"The Mississippi is by far the safest route," Stephan explains, pointing it out on the map. "You can follow its path all the way to Baton Rouge in Louisiana."

"We have a boat," I explain as I pop another piece of peach into my mouth. "It's in Toledo Harbor. It would only take a couple of hours to head back and get it. We could send a small group."

"A boat isn't going to do you any good," Stephan says, his laugh closer to a scoff.

"Why?" I ask, frowning.

"Because there's no water in the Mississippi anymore. The riverbed is completely dry."

"What?" I snap. "Then why would we even bother going that way?"

"Because it's still the best route," Zeke says gently. "And at least this way we won't have to go back for the boat."

I chuck my empty can down on the ground, making it clatter. Everyone jumps at the sound. I don't know why I'm so angry, it's just that fate seems to be throwing every obstacle it can at us.

"You really need to chill out," Stephan says.

"Chill out?" I say, getting more irritated by the second. "What about this scenario do I have to be chilled out about?"

"Well," Stephan says, haughtily, "how about the fact that I know somewhere nearby where we can get motorcycles?"

I stare at him, my mouth agape. "Why didn't you say so?"

He gives me a smug look. "Maybe something to do with you punching me out cold. It didn't exactly warm me to you."

"Brooke!" Bree chastises me. "You didn't, did you?"

"He was pointing a gun at Molly!" I cry, defending myself.

"Stephan," Bree snaps at him. Then she looks at each of us in turn. "Can we all please stop arguing? It's not doing any good. We're all in this together so we may as well start acting like friends."

I fold my arms and stare Stephan down. He gives me a fake smile, one that says we will probably never be friends. But if he knows how to get us bikes, and as long as I'm in possession of his gun, then we're sticking together.

“Fine,” I say, relenting. “Let’s get some sleep. We leave for the Mississippi in the morning.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Ta-da," Stephan says, gesturing to the open garage door.

I peer into the gloom. Inside I see several old vintage motor bikes and choppers, covered in thick dust and cobwebs. They look like they could have belonged to a gang of Hells Angels once upon a time. They've certainly seen better days.

"And these things work?" I ask, incredulous.

I can't help thinking that Stephan's led us on a wild goose chase.

"Oh, they work," he replies.

He walks into the garage and toward one of the choppers, then retrieves the keys from inside its seat compartment. He twirls the keys around his fingers, showing off. I roll my eyes.

"Hurry up, please," I say. Stephan's really testing my patience.

He grins and finally puts a key in the ignition. The bike thrums to life, its engine roaring and throwing out fumes.

"I don't believe it," I say, pacing forward and drawing up beside the bike. "How much gas is in this thing?"

"It has a full tank," Stephan replies. "They all do. I've been siphoning gas for years, filling them all up, just in case."

"In case of what?"

"In case I ever found somewhere to go."

For the first time since I've met him, I feel bad for Stephan. He's a survivor like me, who's done morally questionable things to survive just like I have. Making Molly a hostage was just a desperate act on his part. Can I really say I wouldn't have done the same if our positions were reversed?

"Thanks," I say, trying to sound sincere. "We'll get to the Mississippi in no time at all with these. Come on, guys, grab a bike."

Everyone enters the dark garage and chooses a vehicle. I make sure my bike has a sidecar so that Bree can travel with me with Penelope on her lap. It makes me feel better to have her close. Charlie chooses to ride in a sidecar with Ben. As Ryan attempts to mount a bike, I rest my hand gently on his arm.

"I don't know if it's a good idea for you to be in control of a vehicle after what happened yesterday."

"I'm not an invalid, Brooke," he replies. "I'm fine now."

"I know, I'm just being cautious. And anyway, you should be in a sidecar with Jack really. You are his master, after all."

He finally agrees to get in the sidecar with Molly driving.

Before we set off, Zeke pulls out the map.

"It's four hundred miles direct," he says. "But that takes us straight through Chicago."

I shake my head. “No way. We need to avoid Chicago entirely. There’ll be an arena there. I’m certain.”

He nods in agreement. “Then how about we take this route, heading slightly southwest? We’ll avoid Chicago completely, but it will add an extra three hours to the journey.”

“Three more hours?” Ryan repeats. “That’s a hell of a lot more gas used up than needs to be.”

“I think we should take the direct route,” Molly says, joining in the debate.

“I think we should take the safest route,” Ben contests.

I sigh, my head filled with thoughts that swirl around. “Is there anywhere to stop off midway?” I ask Zeke. “We could do with hunting and picking up some more provisions.”

Stephan makes a scoffing noise. “Yeah, great idea, since you’ve eaten all my rations.”

Even though it’s true that we finished up the last of his rations over breakfast, I shoot him a glare and he quiets down.

Zeke shows me a spot on the map that’s meant to be a wooded area. It’s on the direct route, close to Chicago. It would be risky to go that way but I’m starting to think it’s our best bet.

“Remember this map is about a hundred years old,” Zeke reminds me. “Whether that wood is still there or not, there’s no guarantee.”

I nod, understanding that it would be a risk to head somewhere we can’t be certain exists, especially when it’s so close to a major city.

“Molly and Ryan are right,” I say finally. “We need to head the most direct route. We can stop off here in the forest, pick up some provisions, have a rest. Then we’ll detour a little south so that we miss Chicago entirely.”

I look up at my friends, hoping for confirmation. Ben’s the only one who doesn’t look impressed. He must think I’m siding with Ryan when I’m really just trying to do what’s best for everyone.

Zeke folds up the map and puts it away safely in his pocket. “That’s settled then. Let’s go.”

We mount our bikes and head out of the garage and onto the main road, leaving Toledo and the destroyed rail yard behind us, venturing out on a new path, with a new plan, into the unknown.

* * *

Since there’s no one else on the freeway, we can use as much of the road as we want. It feels freeing, like we’re breaking all the rules of our old civilization.

It’s a cool spring morning. By the color of the sky and the position

of the sun, I would guess it's only slightly after 6 a.m. We all managed to get a decent night's sleep last night and, along with filling our stomachs with Stephan's canned food, we've all woken up feeling rejuvenated.

It takes four hours of solid driving to reach our stop-off point in the woods south of Chicago. To my great relief, the drive is uneventful. After about two hours of cruising, the engines whining in my ears, my friends at my sides, I finally stopped bracing myself for catastrophe.

I slow my bike to a stop beneath a patch of trees. The others draw up beside me and kill their engines. Silence descends. By the time we turn off the main road, fatigue and hunger have set in.

After a moment, birds start singing in the trees.

"Dinner," I say, dismounting my bike.

I look over at Ryan. The two of us spent months hunting in the forests of Fort Noix, and I've been missing those quiet, peaceful moments. I'm expecting him to jump at the opportunity to come hunting with me, but he doesn't look like he wants to go anywhere at all.

"I'll come with you," Ben says quickly.

I look from one to the other as it dawns on me what is happening. The jealousy between them is growing, causing a rift. Before, Ben was the weak one, the distant one, and Ryan was right by my side supporting me. But now, after his near-death experience, Ryan's the one who's becoming withdrawn, and Ben isn't hesitating for a second to step into his shoes.

"You know, there's a lake a little farther north," Zeke says. "Maybe we should send someone to fish as well."

"I'll go," Stephan says. "I know how to fish."

I look at him skeptically. I still don't trust him, even after he led us to the motorbikes and let us eat his food.

"I'll go with him," Zeke says.

"I don't need a chaperone," Stephan replies.

"You don't get a choice," I say to Stephan. Then to Zeke, I add in a hushed tone, "Don't let him out of your sight."

Ben and I collect the bows and arrows and head into the forest. The thick canopy of trees above us provides a nice, cool shade.

We walk quietly through the forests, making sure not to startle any birds. The silence between Ben and me has never been awkward. Our friendship has never needed many words spoken. Ben feels like my companion, like an extension of myself. He's been there since the beginning, since everything changed for me and Bree. He helped me through some terrible times. He's seen me at my absolute worst and he's always been by my side. If he wasn't there, I wouldn't feel right.

I pause and gesture for Ben to do the same. He freezes and we both listen to the twittering coming from the trees above us. I recognize it as the call of grouse.

Slowly, imperceptibly, we both move into position with our arrows poised and ready to fire. The second the grouse take flight, we let the arrows go. They sail through the air, side by side, and each one hits its target.

Elated, I swirl on the spot and embrace Ben. His arms encircle me, holding me close. It feels so good to be reunited with him. Being in his arms feels so right.

I hear a twig snap and leap away from Ben, suddenly filled with guilt. I look up and see Stephan standing there, his eyebrow raised, a row of fish hanging from his line. Zeke's a few steps behind.

"Don't let me interrupt," Stephan says, amused.

"You're not interrupting anything," I mumble, feeling uncomfortable and awkward, putting some extra space between me and Ben. I don't meet anyone's eye as I add, "Let's get the food back to the others."

Ben and I grab the grouse from where they fell, then the four of us head back, not saying a word as we go.

We make it back to the place at the edge of the forest where we pulled over to find that Ryan and Molly have made a sort of camp. Charlie, Bree, and the dogs are all sleeping curled up around each other beside a fire pit lined with hot rocks.

"Grouse," I say to them, holding up the two dead birds. "The others caught fish."

They all look thrilled.

It takes a few hours to cook the fish and birds on the hot rocks. The smell while we're waiting makes us salivate. But the results are better than I expected and everyone sits around munching on the tender meat, relieved to finally be resting and filling their stomachs.

Soon, the light begins to fade.

"Should we set up camp for the night?" Molly asks.

"No," Ryan says. "We should get a move on."

I'm inclined to side with him; the longer we stay out here in the middle of nowhere the more likely we are to run into danger. But there are risks to driving in the darkness as well. We're so close to Chicago we'll have to drive without headlights so as not to draw any attention to our whereabouts. That will make it far more difficult to navigate and far more dangerous to drive. But despite the danger, I'm certain it would be better for us to keep going, albeit slowly and cautiously, than risk being discovered or ambushed in the middle of the night.

"Ryan's right," I say. "We should pack up and ride through the

night."

"I think we should stay," Ben says, challenging me.

I frown, looking at him with confusion. I'd assumed Ben would be on my side—he's seen firsthand what the slaverunners can do after all. A part of me wonders if he's saying that just to start an argument with Ryan.

Whatever his reasoning, it works. I can't tell whether Ryan's making up for lost time or just being overzealous because he has an opposing opinion to Ben, but he pushes his point rather aggressively.

"We'd be sitting ducks!" he cries. "We're far too close to Chicago."

"We'd be driving blind," Ben counters. "It's too dangerous."

"Hardly," Ryan scoffs. "It's not like we're going to run into anyone else out on the road. But if you're worried that your driving skills aren't up to the challenge—"

"My driving skills are fine," Ben shoots back.

Stephan starts laughing, seemingly finding the two boys bickering a source of amusement. I decide that things are getting too heated and step forward to intervene.

"Guys," I say, holding my hands up. "Arguing isn't helping anything."

"But you're siding with him," Ben says.

I can see the hurt in his eyes.

"It's not about sides."

Molly steps in, again trying to be the peacemaker. "We need to do what's best for the kids."

"What's best for the kids is not getting kidnapped by slaverunners," I say. I look at Ben, appealing with my eyes. "You know that. You're just being argumentative."

Ben looks down at the floor. He knows I'm right. He knows the fight he's picking with Ryan isn't about whether we drive through the night or not, but about me.

"Ben, I'm sorry," I say. "But there's plenty of bikes. If you want to stay back and sleep the night, you can. Ryan and I can just go on ahead and meet up with you later."

His gaze snaps up. "No way."

Once again I know he's arguing against me and Ryan being alone together more than anything else.

"There has to be some kind of compromise," I say diplomatically.

Bree, overhearing the dispute, comes over.

"Brooke's right," she says. "We have to keep going. If we stay here we'll get caught by slaverunners."

Ben folds his arms. "I'm not just going to change my mind because an eleven-year-old girl has told me to. That's not how

democracy works."

"Who said this was a democracy?" Bree says haughtily. "Brooke's leader. It's her plan. She gets to decide."

Everyone looks at me. I curse silently in my head. I wish Bree hadn't put me in such a difficult situation. I know Ben's going to read more into my answer than he ought to, that he's going to think that I'm choosing Ryan when really all I'm choosing is common sense. But right now staying alive is more important than not hurting Ben's feelings.

"I'm sorry," I say to him. "But we're driving on. It's only a couple more hours before we reach the Mississippi. We can rest there."

Ben shakes his head and looks so disappointed it makes my stomach ache. The atmosphere is beyond tense. Then suddenly, Stephan starts clapping.

"I'm so glad you guys brought me along for the ride," he says. "This is so entertaining."

Molly shoots him an angry glare.

With a heavy heart, I get back on my bike and try to kick it to life. But nothing happens. I check the gas gauge and realize that it's practically on zero.

"Um, guys!" I call out. "I'm out of gas!"

One by one, everyone checks their own bikes and realizes that the same fate has befallen them. Every single one of our bikes has run out of gas.

I turn on Stephan.

"I thought you said the tanks were full!" I snap. "You said we could make it all the way to the Mississippi."

He looks sheepish. "They were. I guess they just… well, the bikes are really old, you know? Maybe there were leaks in the tubes or something."

Furious, I run over to the road that we'd come along. Sure enough, there are little droplets of gas all along the road. I run back to the others.

"Okay, now we really have to get out of here," I say, urgently. "We've made a trail with gas all the way here. If there are slaverunners on that road, we'll lead them right to us."

Everyone looks terrified.

"You want us to walk?" Bree says, trembling. "In the pitch black?"

"We have no choice," I say, marching ahead. "Come on! Everyone, get a move on!"

I'm starting to lose my cool. But the rest of the gang knows I'm right and they start to follow.

As the night grows darker and colder I curse under my breath.

Our two-hour drive has just turned into a twenty-four-hour trek.

* * *

The sun starts to rise. We've been walking all night. As the black nothingness I'd found comforting disappears, I'm now faced with a sight of destruction and devastation.

Up ahead a rusted metal sign reads Galesburg, but it's the only thing left standing. The rest of the town has been reduced to a huge crater. Someone dropped a bomb here so powerful it wiped the entire town off the face of the earth, leaving behind nothing but a welcome sign teetering on the edge of the crater.

It's heartbreaking to think of what this place once was. To think of all the innocent families blown to pieces, their lives cut short in one catastrophic moment.

"I don't believe it," Ben says, breaking through my thoughts.

I look up. Just ahead, the only thing standing beside the long, straight road, is a used car yard, still filled with cars.

I try not to let myself feel too hopeful, but as the gang rushes over, the dogs barking excitedly at our heels, I start to feel that we might have had our first stroke of luck in hours.

Together we rush across the street to the auto salvage yard. They cars look like ones from the 1950s. The doors, thankfully, are unlocked.

Zeke climbs in the front driver's seat.

"You're not going to believe this," he says. "It has a full tank of gas."

I can't believe our luck. But no sooner do we get the good luck than we're immediately hit with the bad luck.

"Damn, no keys," Zeke says.

"That's not a problem," Molly replies. "I can hotwire a car."

I raise my eyebrows at her. She shrugs.

"We all have pasts, Brooke," she says with a haughty little smile.

She gets the car started then does the same with another. Bree jumps in the back of the other car. Of course, Charlie joins Bree, and Penelope, too, wanting to be with her favorite human, clambers in. Then Jack starts barking at the kids and dog in the back seat, making it very clear that he wants to ride with his furry companion.

Ryan beelines for that car. "I should stay with Jack," he says. "Plus, I want to drive."

Molly takes the passenger seat in the other car next to Zeke. Ben takes the backseat behind Zeke and Molly, then it's just me and Stephan.

“After you,” I say, trying to get him to take the pressure off me over whose car I get in.

He laughs and shakes his head. “No way. I wanna see who Brooke is going to choose!” He makes a kissy face.

“You’re a jerk,” I hiss, looking from one car to the other, from Ben to Ryan, torn, not knowing what to do.

Thankfully, Bree leans out the window. “Come with us, Brooke!” she cries. “Please, please, please!”

I smile. “Of course.”

I turn and clamber in the seat beside Ryan while Stephan waltzes to the other car, whistling nonchalantly as he goes. I don’t look for Ben’s expression. I don’t want to know how angry he is with me for choosing Ryan over him once again.

Once we’re all strapped in, Ryan guns the gas pedal and reverses out of the lot. Zeke does the same. At last we’re on the road, in vehicles. For the first time, the chances of us making it to Texas don’t seem so small.

“Let’s get to the Mississippi already,” I say.

Our two cars cruise along side by side, heading west. As we go, we try to avoid any of the towns or cities, cautious about how close we get to built-up areas. There’s no knowing whether they’ll be in enemy hands, crawling with slaverunners ready to kidnap us and bring us to their arenas. So we stick to the open roads wherever possible, the ones that cut straight through barren landscape.

Darkness falls like a blanket of black. We can hardly see anything beyond the hood of the car, and we certainly can’t see Molly, Zeke, Stephan, and Ben’s car behind us.

Ryan’s a careful driver but I know in another life he wouldn’t be. In another world, a world without the war that’s ravished everything, Ryan and I probably wouldn’t even get along. He’d be the cool senior boy, a bit fringe, a bit tough, driving some beat-up piece of junk and never seen without his trusty pit bull. I’d be… I don’t know what I’d be. I can’t even imagine who I’d be without all the terrible things that have shaped me.

At last, we reach the Mississippi and ride down the slope into the bone-dry riverbed.

Seeing the impact that the war has had on the Mississippi is truly awful. I hate what our species has done to the world, the ways in which it has destroyed nature. My only hope is that one day our country will recover, that the Mississippi will be the beautiful, life-giving river it once was.

“What’s that noise?” Ryan says, breaking me from my thoughts.

I strain to hear over the rumble of the engine. I can just about pick up a noise, a sort of whining. It sounds like a vehicle revving.

“It’s the other car, isn’t it?” I say.

Through the darkness, I can just make out Ryan shaking his head. My blood runs cold.

All at once, a blinding light suddenly appears in the rearview mirror. My heart clenches as I realize we’re not alone, that someone’s been following us.

Suddenly, our car’s shunted forward. I scream and grab hold of my seat as we jerk roughly around. Ryan fights to keep hold of the steering wheel, to keep control. But whatever hit us rams into us again. I can’t see through the bright light, I can’t tell what’s hitting us. But there’s no chance to work it out, because we’re hit again and suddenly we’re spinning, up and over, round and round.

Charlie and Bree are screaming as we spin. My body feels like it’s being hurled through the air.

Then, suddenly, my head slams against the window. I hear a crack. Before I get the chance to work out if it’s the glass or my skull, everything turns black.

PART THREE

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I groan. My head is pounding. I manage to open my eyes a sliver. The daylight is stark and bright, making me wince. I realize my face is against a hard cement ground covered in sand.

Memories of the car crash come back to me in a rush. I sit up, startled. As I do, I hear the distinctive clinking noise of chains.

I look all around. I'm in a bare cell filled with other people. We're all sitting on the dusty ground, chained to the wall. There's a window set high in the bricks, letting in the blistering sunshine. We're definitely still south, but where exactly is a question I cannot answer.

I notice Charlie curled up in a ball opposite me. He's covered in the sandy-colored desert dust, but other than that, he looks like he got out of the crash unscathed. Then I see Bree slumped against a far wall, unconscious. There's crusted blood all over her clothes and matted into her hair. My heart clenches at the sight of her. An instinct in me makes me reach for her and my chains jangle loudly as I move. But they hold me back, stopping me from reaching her.

"Brooke?" I hear someone whisper.

I look left. It's Ryan. He's one of the few prisoners who's awake, and must have been drawn by the sound of my clanking chains.

I'm relieved to see him alive, and glad to know that everyone from our car made it out of the crash. But at the same time I feel frantic, desperate, and distraught. We've been captured. Again. Once more, my freedom has been stolen from me. And I have no idea what happened to the other car, to Molly, Zeke, Stephan, and Ben.

At the thought of Ben, my heart constricts. We parted on bad terms. What if that ends up being the last time I see him alive? How could I have let him get into the other car like that, with so much left unspoken between us?

There's no time to dwell. Though my heart aches with worry over what could have happened to my friends in the other car, I have more pressing matters to deal with in the immediate moment: escape.

"Are you okay?" I say to Ryan.

He nods but he's gritting his teeth and I know something is causing him pain. It's then that I notice Jack isn't with him. His trusty best friend, who has been by his side since forever, has been taken. I look back at Bree and realize that Penelope is missing too. Rage swirls through me at the thought of what might have happened to them.

"What are we going to do?" I say to Ryan.

He shakes his head. "I don't know. Wait. See what's what then come up with a plan."

My stomach drops. I know all too well what's what. I've been in

this situation before. There's only one thing that awaits us, and that's an arena.

Just then, the sound of footsteps comes from the other side of the cell door. Then there's a rusted, grinding noise as someone turns a key in the lock. The door swings open and bangs against the wall, making a cloud of dust whirl into the air.

Many of the prisoners who've been sleeping jerk awake. One of them is Charlie. He looks around, disorientated and panic-stricken. I catch his eye and nod to him, trying to reassure him. But his large, fearful eyes keep being drawn to the figure that just entered the room, a man dressed in a long, black robe, with a large hood that completely obscures his face.

"Morning, sleepyheads," the man says in a thick southern accent. He uses a cheerful tone but I can hear the undercurrent beneath it, one that tells me this man is anything but friendly, that he is cruel and mean. "Who's hungry?"

People begin to moan, stretching their hands out desperately for food. The other prisoners must have been survivors before they were kidnapped, living out in the harsh desert wasteland.

More people enter the room behind the black-clad man, all in similar attire. They're carrying buckets. The buckets are dropped in front of us, one bucket to three or four prisoners. Breakfast. But when I look inside, I recoil. They're filled with dead cockroaches.

"Come on, slaves, eat up!" the man cries sadistically. "We gotta get y'all strong for a day's hard labor!"

I look up at him sharply, trying to make eye contact with him through the slit in his hood.

"Why don't you just take us to the arena and get it over with," I bark at him. "That's why we're here, isn't it?"

There's a pause before the man walks over to me slowly, his heavy boots clunking. He bends down at the knees and gets close to my face.

"That's not why you're here at all, missy," he hisses. "We don't have any arenas here. We've got much better things for y'all to be doing. You see, the other biovictims, they're jealous of y'all, with your pretty features and your healthy bodies. All they want is to eradicate you. Not us. We know that God chose us. We're biovictims because of his grand plan. This new world, the one that exists after his Armageddon, it's a world made for *us.*"

He pulls his hood off in one quick movement. In spite of myself, I flinch. His face is horrific. It looks as though half of it is melting, with one of his eyes dropping down his face at an awful angle. His teeth are exposed on one side of his face where the flesh is no longer there, and there are places on his bald head where the skin has bubbled and

burned.

"You don't like the look of God's new creatures, do you?" he says, so close his spittle hits my face. "Well, you listen to me, missy. This is how it's going to be now. You all had your chance and you blew it. Literally. We're the ones who own the earth now. And that means you gotta work for us."

"You're making us slaves?" I say.

The man stands at last and puts his hood back on. "God said that he put the animals on the earth for us to use. And that's what y'all are to us, nothing more than animals. So we're going to use y'all, just like He said we're meant to. We're going to work y'all to death."

The people who'd brought in the buckets begin hauling prisoners up to their feet, locking them into a row with chains. Ryan gets yanked up and cries out in pain. I can see now that his shoulder has been dislocated, probably from the crash.

I watch helplessly as people are dragged to their feet and added to the chain. Charlie, despite his young age, is shown no mercy, and neither is Bree, who only wakes up, finally, once she's shaken roughly to her feet. I try to get her attention, to calm her down, but she's so frantic she doesn't see me. I can't imagine how frightened she must be feeling to have woken up to this horror.

Finally, I'm added to the row, right at the front. A heavy metal collar is placed around my neck. The chains weigh so much it's hard to even stand upright.

"This way," the hooded man says to me.

When I don't move he gestures to one of the other robed men, who then pulls a long whip from his belt and strikes me with it. The pain is so sharp I'm momentarily winded. I gasp and feel tears spring to my eyes.

"I said, 'this way,' missy," the leader snarls.

I don't argue again. I begin to trudge through the cell, following his lead out of the prison cell, along the corridor, then finally out the cell block and into the bright sunshine.

It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust. When they do, I gasp in horror. As far as the eye can see are groups of slaves, other people like me, chained together, moving heavy blocks and stones to make buildings. They're all painfully thin and barely clothed. Many of them are bright red, sunburned from the harsh glare of the sun. I can see why our captors wear the robes now, to protect their skin from the UV glare. Black-robed slavers ride about on motorbikes, making clouds of dust fly into the air. They whip the prisoners as they go, seemingly at random.

Enormous structures like temples are dotted around, made of huge stone bricks. Some stones stand several feet high, while others

have intricate patterns, statues and columns carved into them. It reminds me of pictures of Ancient Egypt that I learned about in school. The slavers are building a new city in the crater where another city once stood. It's like being in a valley, only this one was man-made, created by bombs, bombs that were far more destructive than anything I saw in the north. These bombs have created a wasteland, a brutal landscape of desert. There's not a tree or body of water as far as the eye can see.

"Welcome," the robed man says in his fake cheery voice, "to Memphis, Tennessee."

* * *

We trudge along, me leading the way, following the robed man. The whole time, my eyes are darting around me, taking in everything, seeking a way to break out of this nightmare. We're so close to reaching Texas, there's no way I'm giving up now. I'll do whatever it takes to get out of this place.

My heart soars when I catch sight of bright ginger hair. I look over. Molly is in another chain of prisoners, being led the same direction as us. She's gritting her teeth and limping. I let out the breath I'd been holding as I see that a few people behind her stands Ben. I'm relieved to discover that he's completely unscathed from the crash, though there's blood on his clothes. I scan the rest of the line but Stephan and Zeke are nowhere to be seen. I can't help but fear the worst.

We're led past a stack of cages filled with animals. I see that crammed inside one of the cages are Penelope and Jack. They look terrified, huddled together, shaking. My only comfort is that they have each other.

As we trudge through the wasteland, I manage to catch Molly's eye. Silently, we try to communicate with one another. She's looking at the bikes, same as me. We're both thinking that they're our only chance of escape. If we want to live to see tomorrow, we're going to have to steal them somehow.

I gesture to the chains around my wrists. The way that we're all connected together means that if I yank hard enough, I could get the whole line to fall. Then, in the confusion, we might be able to find a way to break free.

I look back at Ryan and hold up my chained hands, trying to communicate to him what I intend to do. I mime tugging them down and he nods in understanding. But my attempt to communicate with him doesn't go unnoticed by the guards. A slaver zooms over on his

bike and cracks his whip against my chest before roaring away. I cry out in pain and fall to my knees. Blood appears on my top.

Despite the pain making black stars flash in my vision, I know I can't let this opportunity go to waste. I pretend to be struggling to stand up, knowing that the slaver will return and whip me again. As I slowly struggle to my knees, I quickly glance over at Molly and nod, as if to say: now. We tug on our chains simultaneously. I see her line begin to tumble, and can hear the prisoners behind me begin to fall as well. At the same time, the slaver circles back around on his bike, his whip raised high, ready to discipline me for my rebellion. I reach out and grab the whip as he cracks it down. I grip with all my strength, not letting go, then yank it toward me. The slaver goes spinning off his bike, smacking to the ground with a crunch. The bike heads straight toward a crowd of people, making them scatter in all directions.

Chaos breaks out in that moment. Slavers start whizzing toward us on their bikes, attempting to quell the pandemonium with their whips. But the rest of my group understands what is happening—they know instinctively that I'm trying to free us all—and the other prisoners catch on too. The slavers may have weapons and bikes, but we have more people and an unbreakable will to live. If I can just get my chains off, I'll be a formidable opponent.

There's a bike screaming toward me, and I know I have only one shot to do what I'm planning to do. It's a crazy idea but I have no other options.

As the bike flies toward me, its rider ready to strike me with the whip, I throw my chained hands out directly in front of its tires. As the whip lashes against my back, making me scream with pain, the bike roars directly over the rusty chains, snapping them clean in half. I'm free.

I rise to my feet immediately and leap, like a cat, onto the back of the motorbike. The slaver is not expecting me to move so quickly and doesn't get his defenses up in time. After a short grapple, I manage to shove him off the bike. He hits the ground hard and goes rolling across the desert earth.

I take control of the bike and double back on myself, heading straight for Ryan.

"Chains!" I shout. "I'm going to cut your chains!"

I see him crouch and lay his arms out, closing his eyes, unable to look. But I steer perfectly over the chains, and they snap beneath my wheels. He's free. Now there are two of us able to fight.

The prisoners in Molly and Ben's chain are being surrounded by bikes, penned in like sheep, with nowhere to go. It's up to me and Ryan to liberate them.

I slow the bike, allowing him to leap on the back.

"You're bleeding," he says, leaping on.

"I'll be fine."

He encircles my waist with his good arm, the other hanging limply by his side, and I rev the bike again. Together we race forward, plowing straight toward the group. I'm trying to call their bluff, to get them to scatter, but they're holding their positions.

"WE'RE GOING TO CRASH!" Ryan screams in my ear.

I can see the terrified faces of the prisoners behind the line of captors on bikes. Everyone knows what is about to happen, and I'm the only one who can stop it. But I won't. This is our one chance. I gun the bike, gaining more and more speed.

"JUMP WHEN I SAY!" I shout back to Ryan, praying he can hear me over the roaring wind.

His grip on me gets tighter and tighter.

"NOW!" I scream.

We both jump to the side, letting our bike carry on forward without us, and hit the ground hard. I roll across the parched earth, one, two, three times, then manage to stop myself. I glance over my shoulder just in time to see the bike slam into the others at full speed. The gas tank explodes and I duck down, covering my head with my arms as flames and bits of twisted metal fly into the air and rain down over me.

This is the chance the other group needed. In the chaos and under the cover of thick, billowing smoke, they're able to scurry away from their captors, many of whom are now lying groaning on the ground or rolling around in an attempt to put out the fires ravaging them.

"THIS WAY!" I scream, leaping to my feet, ignoring the aches and pains in my body from hitting the ground.

A little way ahead, Ryan manages to drag himself up. His bad arm dangles uselessly at his side.

All the prisoners begin to follow me. For the first time since being chained to the front of my group, I catch sight of Bree, way, way back. She and Charlie are attempting to liberate Jack and Penelope from their cages. I'm about to scream at them that there's no time when they manage to get the cage open. The dogs leap down and start running toward me and Ryan. Bree and Charlie clasp their hands together and run at full speed through the fire and smoke, jumping over smoldering body parts and hunks of metal. I want to run to Bree, to sweep her into my arms, but I know I have to keep going forward. I have to trust that she'll follow.

Ryan is right beside me as I run. Out of all the prisoners, we're the only two completely free from our shackles. The others are still bound together. They're all running at different speeds and attempting

to maneuver in different directions around debris. It's slowing us down, giving the slavers a chance to regroup. There's no way we'll be able to get all the prisoners free. But then I have an idea. Maybe we can use this to our advantage.

I tell Ryan my plan and he looks at me like I'm crazy. But when he looks back and sees the bikes racing toward us in a line, he knows this is the only chance we have of defeating our captors. We pass the message back to the prisoners and one by one they nod their agreement.

The bikes are gaining on us, and the slavers riding them swing their whips over their heads, ready to strike us down.

"NOW!" I shout.

All at once, the prisoners fan out in a long line, stretching the chains that connect them so they're just level with the necks of the approaching riders. One by one the slavers are caught in the trap, the chains pinging them from their bikes and throwing them to the ground.

Some of the bikes keep rushing forward before crashing and exploding, while others skid to their sides and halt. Ryan and I rush forward and grab the spare bikes. Now it's up to us to keep the remaining slavers at bay while the prisoners escape. Molly's using a dropped axe to start smashing apart the chains and freeing the prisoners. Once they have their arms freed they'll be in much better positions to steal bikes.

Ryan and I also grab discarded tools, brandishing them as weapons as we start circling back and forth on our bikes, facing off with the remaining slavers. We're trying to keep them at bay long enough for the rest of our group to be freed.

The scene behind us is one of utter chaos. Prisoners are cowering as the slavers attempt to whip them into submission. Other robed men are running around on fire, screaming, trying to fan out the flames. More still lie dead on the ground, their limbs twisted and jutting out at painful angles. There's thick smoke everywhere, obscuring my vision. Then, through the smoke, a figure emerges.

Despite being fully robed, I recognize him straightaway as the man who'd first spoken to us in the prison cell. He's standing at the front of a group of slavers, leading them to battle. A red mist descends over my vision. I rev the bike, brandish the crowbar in my hand, and race toward him. I swing the crowbar back and, as I pass, bring it down with all my strength. I hear the crack of his skull, see him fall, dead, to the ground, and a sick satisfaction washes over me.

I loop back and see that Molly and the others have managed to get hold of bikes. As much as I wish we could liberate all the prisoners here, I have to be selfish and look after my own. I drive up to my

group.

"Bree, get on the back," I say to my sister, who is cuddling Penelope in her arms. "Molly, you take Charlie and Jack. Ryan, Ben, take a bike each. We'll need the spare spaces for Zeke and Stephan once we find them. Come on, let's go."

Everyone gets into position and I lead the way through the compound, racing past burning structures and groups of slavers and prisoners, trying to find Zeke and Stephan amongst them. But they're nowhere to be seen.

"We have to get out of here!" Molly cries from behind.

"NO!" I shout back. "We need to find Zeke and Stephan first."

"There's no time," she barks.

She's right. The slavers have noticed our little gang and they're starting to follow. But the thought of leaving my friends behind makes my blood run cold.

"We can't leave them!" I scream. "We have to rescue them."

Molly locks her eyes with mine. "We can't rescue them, Brooke. They're not here. They're dead."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

We're still tearing along the road on the bikes, but it feels like the ground has fallen away beneath my feet. I can hardly breathe.

"I'm sorry," Molly cries over the wind as we race across the parched earth. "They didn't survive the crash. We have to go."

Stephan and Zeke are dead? I can't believe it. I don't want to believe it.

I look back over my shoulder. They others look as depressed as me. None of us wants to accept the reality of having lost two of our group, and I can't help but feel like their deaths are on my shoulders. I look at Ben, hoping that the only other person in the car who may have been witness to their tragic demise will be able to refute the bombshell Molly has just dropped on me.

"Ben was passed out," Molly shouts. "He didn't see. But I did. They're gone, Brooke. We have to save ourselves."

Emotions threaten to choke me. I feel like I could easily give in to the blackness, to give up the fight.

"Brooke!" Bree cries from the back of the bike. "Listen to Molly. We have to save ourselves."

The sound of her voice grounds me, brings me back to the moment. We may have lost our friends but we haven't lost our hope. Now isn't the time to break down. Like my dad would always say, crying won't keep you alive. No matter how terrible I feel, I have to do what needs to be done to survive.

I grip the handlebars of the bike hard in my fists and grit my teeth, more determined than ever.

"Let's go!" I cry.

Without another word, we rev the bikes, driving even faster through the thick smoke. We're searching for a road, a way out. The slavers got into the crater somehow, and we'll be able to get out if we find it. But driving through the crater city is dangerous. There are still slavers milling around, not to mention prisoners who are desperate to be liberated. The whole time I'm on a knife edge, feeling like my world could end any second. Bree must feel it too; her clutch on me is so tight it's painful.

Finally I see a steep incline leading out of the crater. It's been carved like a road, winding up the crater edge. I pray our bikes can handle such a difficult climb.

"THERE!" I cry to the others.

One by one we start to race up the steep road. I'm gunning the bike, knowing the only thing that will carry me up is speed. As we burst through the cloud of smoke, I know we're now in plain view of

all the slavers below. There's no hiding on the crater's edge. We're completely exposed.

It's then that I hear someone cry out. Instantly, I recognize the voice as belonging to Ben.

I look back and see that his battered bike is struggling to get up the incline. It has clearly been damaged in all the fighting and is starting to give out. It's getting slower and slower. Behind him, racing along on their own bikes, are a group of slavers.

"Ryan!" I shout. "You have to go back for Ben."

Ryan grits his teeth. "No way. If I go back, the slavers will get me."

I stare at him, horrified. "We can't leave him!"

"We left Zeke," he spits back. "We left Stephan."

"They died, Ryan. You heard Molly. We have to let them go. But Ben is still alive and he needs our help!"

Behind me, clinging on with dear life, Bree starts to cry.

"Please," she begs Ryan. "You're the only one with a spare space. Don't leave Ben to die."

The motorbikes are getting so close to Ben now it's almost too much to watch. I feel like every muscle in my body has tensed as I wait for Ryan's decision.

Finally, he lets out a deep sigh and turns his bike around, heading for Ben. The rest of us keep gunning it along the narrow pathway, racing up and up, higher and higher. I can't look back, terrified that I've sent Ryan to his death. I can't lose them both.

"BREE!" I shout over the roaring wind and revving engine. "What's happening?"

I can feel her cheek pressed into my back. The vibrations from the bike are making the wounds from being whipped sting.

"They're okay," she says. "Ryan's got Ben."

I let out my breath. They've made it. For now.

Just then, there's an almighty explosion. I can't look back, too scared that if I do so I'll veer off the narrow road and plunge into the crater beneath. Bree fills me in.

"Ryan and Ben blew up the bike," she cries. "The rest of the slavers are gone."

They did it. We're free. We made it.

What's left of us, anyway.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

We travel south, following the dried up riverbed of the Mississippi, riding without stopping. I know it only takes about eight hours from Memphis to Houston, and I'm desperate not to stop. But everyone's weary, battered, and exhausted, and eventually, after traveling for two hours, even I have to concede that we need to rest.

The devastation here is absolute. Everything has been completely flattened, reduced to a desert. The bombs that caused craters as big as towns in the north have completely flattened cities in the south. What were once bustling metropolises have been completely eradicated. All around, as far as the eye can see, there is nothing. Which means nowhere to hide, nowhere to shelter, and nowhere to hunt.

Finally, we draw to a halt. I get off the bike and help Bree down. Her face is streaked with tears and I realize she must have been crying about Zeke's and Stephan's deaths the whole way. I can't say I blame her. If my dad hadn't drilled it into me not to cry, I would have broken down too.

I want to comfort Bree but the guilt I feel over causing her so much pain holds me back. Luckily, Charlie comes over and hugs Bree close. She cries into his shoulder. Penelope goes over to her as well. I leave the three of them to it and walk over to the rest of the gang.

Ryan is slumped in a sitting position against a rock, cradling his dislocated arm.

"Want me to pop it back into place?" I say.

"Want is a strong word," he says, wryly. "But yeah."

I position myself, holding him by the top of the arm with one hand and holding the shoulder with the other. Then I yank. There's a huge crunching noise as the bone pops back into its socket. Ryan cries out, causing Jack to run over and start licking him.

"It's okay," he says through gritted teeth as he pats the dog's head. "I'm okay, boy."

Ben comes over to my side.

"Remember when you did that to my broken nose?" he says.

I do. It feels like a million years ago, in a whole different world. Up north, the effects of nuclear war have turned the place to ice, making the winters harsh and unforgiving. But down here in the south, there's been a different effect. Winters have been all but banished. There is perpetual, blistering sunshine. And we're all suffering because of it. Dehydrated, sunburned, sweating.

Despite my grossness, I can't help but throw my arms around Ben. The last time we spoke properly we were arguing. Now we're both still here. Both still alive. We hold each other for a long time.

“Brooke?” Ryan says, breaking up my and Ben’s moment.

I let my arms fall from Ben and turn to look at him. I can’t help but feel angry. Ryan almost left Ben to die. It will take me a while before I can forgive him.

“I think we’d better try hunting,” he says. “The kids are starving.”

I move away from Ben and look around. “Hunt where?” I say. “There’s nowhere around for miles.”

“There are birds,” he says. Then he tips his eyes down. “Vultures.”

I know what that means. That somewhere nearby, the vultures are picking on the bones of dead people, other survivors who’ve lost their battle to the harsh desert landscape. As much as it revolts me, Ryan’s right to bring them up as a source of food.

“Okay,” I say. “Let’s go.”

We leave Molly and Ben to set up a fire so we can roast whatever we come back with, and Ryan and I trudge out into the desert together.

All of our belongings were taken back in the prisons in Memphis, so the only weapons we have now are the crowbars, axes, and spades we managed to grab as we were leaving. It’s going to make hunting even more difficult, but we have no other choice. We take Jack with us too, hoping that he may be able to sniff out an easier catch for us.

We’re silent as we go, but after a while, Ryan begins to speak.

“I’m sorry about what happened back there,” he says.

“You mean about you almost leaving Ben to die?” I challenge him.

He looks away, ashamed. “Yeah.”

I shake my head, fuming. “How could you?”

“I thought it was a suicide mission. I didn’t think I’d make it.”

I realize then what Ryan did for me. He thought going back to get Ben would mean certain death, yet he still did it. I should be thanking him, not berating him. Feeling ashamed, I finally mumble an apology, and we carry on in silence.

After a good twenty minutes walking, Ryan freezes. “Look,” he says, pointing into the distance.

I can just make out a patch of trees. The sight is completely out of place in the harsh desert landscape. As we draw closer I realize the trees aren’t growing out of the ground at all, but leaning against something. A fence? My heart stops as I realize it’s a dwelling that’s been covered in branches to conceal it. Through the trunks I can make out signs of life: a shack, a tin roof, something that looks like a well.

Ryan and I exchange a look. Neither of us can handle more fighting and whoever lives inside could be dangerous. But we also can’t give up on the chance that we may have found shelter. Our

group could seriously do with some shade.

"Shall we?" he says.

I nod my agreement and tighten my grip on the crowbar I'm carrying.

Carefully we approach the dwelling, which consists of little more than a wooden hut. It looks so out of place amongst the desolation. It must have been erected after the bombs. There's no way it would have survived them if all the other buildings around here were eradicated. Someone, some survivor, decided to make this empty wasteland his home.

We get to the hut and Ryan opens the door, crowbar raised over his head. Inside, everything is in darkness. It smells of dust.

I go in first. Jack races in after me, sniffing all the corners and crevices.

Whoever lived here was as much a survival nut as my dad. There are weapons and medical supplies, matches, flashlights, bandages, thread and needle, and, even more importantly, a small, wind-up radio. There's also enough food for us to eat well for at least a couple more days, though we're too close to our destination to slow down now. Still, it would be a great place to rest up for the night.

While Ryan seems overjoyed by the feast we'll be able to eat, I'm happier about the discovery of the radio. I grip it in my hands, feeling like I've just witnessed a miracle.

"We can use this to try to get in radio contact with the military base in Texas!" I cry, clutching it to my chest. "Tell them we're coming. Get their exact coordinates."

Ryan seems happy for me and my discovery and smiles encouragingly.

"Here, look," Ryan says, as Jack becomes excited by something on the other side.

I walk over and see that there's a trap door in the floor. Whoever built this was clever enough to also dig underground for some protection.

"What if there's someone down there?" I say.

"I guess now's the time to find out," Ryan replies.

He heaves open the trapdoor and we descend into the darkness. The underground bunker is a small room with bedding and pillows. It looks a bit like a nest. Certainly big enough and cozy enough for us.

"Let's get the others," I tell Ryan. "I think this would be a great place to rest up."

We head back toward the camp to fetch the others, relieved that we won't have to dine on fire-roasted vulture tonight.

But as we draw up toward the spot where we left the others, something unusual catches my attention. I recognize the silhouettes of

my friends milling around, but there is someone else there, someone unfamiliar.

I catch Ryan's arm. "Who's that?" I say.

He squints, trying to make it out. "A stranger."

We give each other a wary look. We've been lucky so far with the survivors we've run into but I'm always on edge, always on the lookout for danger. That the stranger seems to be amongst the group calms my nerves a little; they've clearly deemed him safe.

We start to draw toward the gang. The stranger who has joined them is an older man, rake thin, with long white hair. He has a rasping laugh that I can hear even from this far away. Jack sprints up, yapping away, and runs in circles round the man's ankles, making him let out another one of his thick, mucusy laughs.

"Well, well, well, who's this then?" I hear him say as he crouches down and pets Jack. Then he looks up and sees Ryan and me approaching. "Well, howdy," he says, straightening up and extending one of his grubby hands.

I take it and shake. Ryan, cautiously, does the same.

"I'm Brooke," I say. "Who are you?"

"Craig," he replies, squinting against the sunshine. "Craig Merryweather. Your friends here told me you've traveled all the way from Quebec."

I nod. "And you? Where are you from?"

He shrugs. "Here and there. But mostly here." He grins, showing off a row of rotten teeth.

Bree looks up at me. "Did you find something for dinner?" she asks. "I'm hungry."

I look at Ryan, trying to judge whether to reveal our find or not in front of the stranger. He gives me a slight nod, as if to say he thinks it's safe.

"We did," I say. "There's a shack up there with supplies in it."

Craig suddenly lets out one of his croaking laughs. "That's my shack!" he cries, slapping his knee like I've just said the punch line of a joke. "But you can all come along. Stay the night. Get some rest." He eyes the collar round my neck. "Looks like you've been through the wars."

I catch Ryan's eye, silently asking him whether we ought to go or not. But really, we have no other choice. We're too exposed here and we have nothing to eat. We can eat and sleep in the bunker. Plus, there's more of us than him. He's far too outnumbered to try anything.

"Okay," I say finally. "Let's go."

* * *

Everyone takes it in turns to eat a pickle out of a jar. Then we use the medical supplies to patch ourselves up. I hadn't realized how badly wounded I was by the whip. There's a huge gash across my chest and another across my back. Molly cleans them both and sews them up, but I'm probably going to have scars. The adrenaline must have stopped me from feeling any pain. I'm also covered in bruises from the car crash. I look like a state.

"How did you guys all meet then?" Craig asks as he offers around some canned peaches for dessert.

"It's a long story," I say, scooping one up with my fingers and plopping it in my mouth. It's sweet and sticky, and so delicious.

"It's nice you've got each other," Craig replies. "I've been alone for years."

I feel sorry for him. At least on Catskills Mountain we had trees around, and animals. The desert is completely barren. It's the sort of landscape that could drive you mad.

"Why did you settle here?" I ask.

Craig shrugs. "Good a place as any." Then he laughs again, wheezing as he does. "I mean there's nothing around for miles and miles."

For someone who has been alone for so long, he seems strangely jovial. I can't help but think of Emmanuel in the castle on the Thousand Islands. Being alone has driven him crazy, but maybe that's the point. Maybe because being crazy has made it possible for him to survive.

There's ample space in the bunker part for everyone to get a place to sleep, though we leave our stuff upstairs in order not to crowd the room. We all huddle up together, full after eating jar after jar of provisions. Knowing we're so close to Houston—just an eight-hour drive—has made us throw caution to the wind. We all know that once we wake up tomorrow morning, we'll head out on the open road and reach our destination. With the radio to help guide us, there's no way we can fail. That doesn't stop me whispering a prayer under my breath. This world is brutal and unpredictable and I know that between now and tomorrow evening, anything could happen.

For the first time in a long time, we feel like we can relax, let our guards down just a little bit. The bunker feels so secure, not to mention being in the middle of literally nowhere. But feeling secure gives our minds the chance to process what's happened. One by one, our emotions creep up on us. Zeke and Stephan are dead. So are Rose, Flo, and Logan. We've all lost so much, seen so much, fought for so long.

"Hey, Molly," I say when I realize sleep won't come to me. "What did you mean when you said we all had pasts?"

I hear her sigh in the darkness. “I meant that I was a bit of trouble when I was a kid. The hotwiring cars kind. My parents were going crazy because of me. I was always in trouble. Then the war came and they died. There’s nothing like being orphaned to make you clean up your act.”

Her words hang in the air. Silence falls in the cabin as we all process what she said.

“I lost my parents too,” Ryan says. “During one of the first airstrikes.”

I roll onto my side and look over at where his disembodied voice is coming from. It’s so dark that I can’t even make out his silhouette. I wonder if that’s the reason for his sudden candidness. In all the six months we were together in Fort Noix, Ryan never spoke about anything personal like his family or life before the war. I never asked because I figured he had a reason not to.

“But it was when my sister died that it was the worst,” he finishes.

“What happened to her?” Bree asks softly.

“She had an asthma attack. Can you believe it? With the war and the slaverunners and nuclear destruction it was her own body that killed her. She’d run out of medication and that was that. She was six years old.”

Six years old. The same age as Trixie.

“My brother was killed by slaverunners,” Ben says.

His voice is as clear as a bell. It’s the first time I’ve heard him truly admit his brother is dead. For a long time, he was clinging onto the hope that he was alive, but it seems that he’s finally accepted reality.

“You had a brother?” Ryan asked.

I think it’s the first time I’ve heard Ryan and Ben behave cordially to one another since they first met back at Fort Noix. Finally, they have something in common, something that can make them realize they’re not so different from one another, that they’re both on the same team.

“I did,” Ben says. “It’s how Brooke and I met. We were chasing the car that had Bree and my brother in it.”

“He was brave,” Bree said. “Right up to the end. He didn’t let the slaverunners hurt me. And he loved you. He said you would come for him.”

There’s a long silence.

“Thank you,” Ben finally says. I can hear the emotion thick in his voice.

“Flo wasn’t my only sister,” Charlie says suddenly. “I had two other ones, Daisy and Rebecca. Flo was the oldest. I was the

youngest."

"I didn't know that," I say into the darkness.

I can hardly believe we've all been beside each other so long without getting to know the fundamentals. It's just another thing the war stole from us: socialization, communication, friendship. When your life is reduced to fighting and surviving, there's never really a good time for a chat.

"That's why Flo wanted me to be stronger," Charlie adds. "She didn't want me to get taken like they were."

"Was it slaverunners?" Molly asks.

"Yes," Charlie says. "Slaverunners."

No one asks anymore. The very fact that we've even spoken feels like the beginning of a healing process has begun. It's like we've stepped over some invisible line, broken down one of our guarded barriers. In this awful, terrifying world, opening up to each other about our pasts has been one of the scariest things we've done.

Despite our exhaustion, no one sleeps well that night. Bree wakes several times, sweating and screaming. She used to have night terrors all the time when we lived alone on the mountains but they stopped when we were at Fort Noix. I feel terrible for putting her in a position where she is so scared again. The only difference now is she has Charlie to comfort her. I can't help but feel a little pang of jealousy as I realize she leans on him more readily now than she does on me. It's partly her growing up and becoming independent—she's starting to realize she can't rely on me forever—but it's also partly because of me, because of how I've had to shut down my emotions to get through it all. I've been through so much, I don't have anything left in me to give.

As I lie there in the darkness, my mind mulling over everything we've been through, it dawns on me that I've become the soldier my dad always wanted me to be, the practical, tough, emotionless son he never had. But I also know that my emotionless exterior will only last so long. I won't be able to keep it up forever. One day, all the heartache will hit me at once, and when it does, I'll cry enough tears to refill the Mississippi.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I'm almost surprised when I wake the next morning, still alive and in one piece. No disaster befell us during the night like I've come to expect. I even slept at some point.

I still have the heavy metal neck brace on that the slavers put on me and have no idea how I'm going to get it off; I can't exactly get Molly to take her axe to it. It's irritating and cumbersome, but it's just another niggling pain I'm going to have to endure.

My wounds are sore as I start to climb the ladder. When I reach the trap door, I push up with my hands and discover that it's stuck. I push again, putting more strength into it. But it doesn't budge.

I start to panic. The darkness down in the bunker seems to suddenly envelop me, and the stagnant air seems to grow even hotter. I can't help but think of the prison cell Ben and I were locked in back in Arena 1 in all those months ago.

Finally, I jam my shoulder in the trapdoor hard enough for it to give. The hinges ping off as I slam my palms into it.

Quickly, I ascend the ladder, and the sight that meets me makes me cry out in despair.

Everything is gone.

From the floorboards beneath me, I can hear people jerking awake, scrabbling to get to the ladder and find out what's making me wail. Ryan's the first to emerge out of the hole. He looks at where I sit crumpled on the floor with an alarmed expression on his face.

"He took everything!" I cry. "Craig. He stole everything."

The others begin filing out of the underground bunker, and look around at the empty room with dismay. The food, the weapons, our backpacks, everything has gone. Then I realize, with an even greater despair, that our map has been taken as well.

Ryan comes over and drags me back up to my feet.

"We can't stay here, Brooke. We don't know who he will have alerted to our presence. We have to leave."

I know he's right but I can hardly stand. The shock of losing our possessions is too great for me to bear. All that food, gone, and the means with which to hunt stolen from us too. What are we going to do?

Finally, I manage to stand and stagger out of the shack and into the bright daylight. At the very least, our bikes remain. Craig must have left them knowing the engine noise would wake us up.

Without the map to guide us to Houston, we have no choice but to follow the Mississippi south. The roads are so destroyed here that there aren't even any signs we can follow, and the bombs have

flattened everything, meaning there aren't even any distinguishable landmarks. It may add some more hours onto our journey but at least we'll end up in Louisiana eventually, and then it's just a case of heading west until we hit Houston.

We mount the bikes and go, my heart falling as I lose a bit more faith in the kindness of mankind.

* * *

After several hours driving, our gas gauges start to get low. It worries me to think we might have to make the last leg of the journey on foot.

We're in a town built on the banks of the river that hasn't been completely flattened. It's called Baton Rouge and the road here is still intact. There's a road sign informing us that Route 10 heads all the way west right to Houston. I can hardly believe our luck. The road sign tells us it's 271 miles, which will take about six hours if the road holds out the whole way. As long as we don't have to detour or run out of gas we should be there by nightfall.

It seems like everything is finally looking up. But a feeling inside of me says it won't last for long.

We've been riding for another four hours when something up ahead gets my attention. I can't quite tell what it is I'm looking at yet, but something about the view ahead of me isn't quite right.

The closer we get, the better my view becomes, and it dawns on me that we're approaching a series of massive craters that have completely obliterated the road.

We drive up to the precipice and stop. One by one, we dismount from our bikes and stand side by side in a row staring at the chasm before us, the latest hurdle blocking our way.

"It looks like the Grand Canyon," Bree says.

I don't know how she can find beauty in it at all. To me, it looks like a scar in the earth. A war-inflicted wound. A gash that will never heal, violently blighting the world.

I can't help the disappointment that bites at me. We're less than two hours from Houston and now we're facing another massive detour that might add who knows how many hours onto our journey. We're so low on gas, I don't even know if our bikes can handle going off course again. The last thing we need is to be stranded and have to proceed on foot. It would be a cruel trick for fate to play on us when we're so close to the Texas border.

"What are we going to do?" Molly says. "We can't go around it. It looks like it stretches on for miles."

She's right. The crater goes on and on, as far as the eye can see.

"We'll have to find a way down," I say.

"You want to drive through it?" Ryan questions me, an eyebrow raised.

"What about the radiation?" Ben adds. "It will be worse down there. We can't risk exposure."

As much as it frustrated me when the two were arguing, having them team up against me is even more annoying.

"Do either of you have a better plan? You know how to make a bridge?" I say sarcastically in response. When I'm met by a wall of silence, I add, "Didn't think so."

And with that, we get back on the bikes and begin driving slowly along the edge, looking for a place we might be able to drive down. But this crater isn't home to a slaver community. No one's chiseled a path for bikes into the crater's edge. It's just a sharp, jagged hole, blasted into the earth by a nuclear bomb.

"If we had some rope, we could try shooting it across with an arrow," Molly says.

"I'm pretty sure that only works in cartoons," I say. "Plus, there's the whole not having any rope situation."

"What if we abandon the bikes?" Bree says from behind me. "Maybe we'd be able to scramble down?"

It's one of the more sensible suggestions, but it's still too risky. Not having the bikes could mean the difference between life and death. We need to keep hold of them as long as we possibly can.

"Hey, look!" Charlie suddenly cries, pointing ahead.

We ride over to where he was pointing and see animal tracks leading down into crater. If we follow in their footsteps, we're bound to find a safe way down. It looks like a pack of them walk this route regularly, at least enough to have worn a wide groove into the mountainside. But I look at the others, unsure.

"They might be predators," I say.

Molly raises a cocksure eyebrow. "Last time I checked, we were the predators," she says.

I can't help but smile at her fighting spirit. She's right. Whatever animals made those tracks, we're stronger, better, and fiercer than them.

"Okay," I say. "Let's do this."

I lead the way down the perilous path. We don't use the motors, instead letting gravity do the work. Any way we can save gas now we'll have to take. Plus, if we're quiet enough, we won't draw attention to ourselves to whatever predators are lurking in the bottom of the crater.

Bree holds onto me tightly, tense as I maneuver down the steep

incline. Bits of rock tumble from beneath my tires, making my heart fly into my mouth. She's gripping so hard it's starting to irritate the wounds on my chest and back.

After a tense ten minutes, we finally make it into the crater. As soon as I get on level land, an eerie feeling comes over me. My spine tingles as I get that undeniable sensation that we're being watched.

We race across the trough of the crater then reach the steep wall at the other side. There's no sign of a path back up. I curse under my breath.

"We need to search on foot," I say. "There's not enough gas to keep riding back and forth."

As I start scanning the crater's edge, it occurs to me that the only way we're getting the bikes back up is by pushing. Even if we do find a path we can follow, it's going to be back-breaking work getting back out of here.

"I think I've found something!" Molly calls.

We all go over and see her peering into a hole, five feet in diameter, dug into the side of the crater. It's clearly been made by an animal of some sort.

"Do you think it's a burrow?" I ask.

"I guess so," Molly says. "Pretty big burrow."

I don't want to even imagine the type of creature that's living inside. At the basin of the crater, the radiation will be high, meaning whatever lives down here will have taken a huge dose over the years. Just like the crazies in the lakes in the north, the creatures living down here will have evolved into something unrecognizable and formidable.

We all agree it's too risky to venture into the burrow, even if it does eventually lead out of the crater. If there is something sleeping inside, it's probably best to let it rest.

"I think I see something," Ben says, peering into the distance.

Sure enough, there's another path leading up the crater, made by the same prints as the one we took down. The animals that made these tracks have shown us down into the crater and are now offering us a way back out. They're like guardian angels.

We go back to get the bikes and head toward the path. But as we go, a new noise joins the thrumming of our engines.

Jack and Penelope are suddenly alert, their ears pricking up, their teeth bared.

"What's that noise?" I call out to the others.

We draw to a halt and cut off the engines. As soon as we do, the noise becomes perceptible. There's no mistaking it. It's the howling of wolves. And it's close. Too close for comfort.

Penelope and Jack immediately join in with the howling. Bree

tries to quiet Penelope down but it's no use. The tiny Chihuahua is trying to make herself look fierce.

"Quick," I say. "We have to go."

But it's too late. All at once, we're surrounded by the most disgusting creatures I've ever seen. They look like wild dogs, but the radiation they've absorbed from having lived in the crater has made their bodies mangled. Their spines are curved upward, making them look more like hyenas than dogs. Their fur is balding in places, sticking up coarsely in others. Tumors grow out of their skin. Saliva drips from their jaws in thick strings, and their teeth, like their claws, are enormous.

I gun the engine of my bike, hoping that the noise will scare them off, and start whizzing around and around in circles, trying to tire the creatures out so that they're slow enough to take a hit. The others do the same. The wolves chase our bikes, their eager jaws snapping, treating it like a game, as though they're nothing but puppies. It reminds me of Sasha, our old pet dog, and the way she would lumber around play fighting with me. I'm almost relieved that she was killed by slaverunners; they saved her from this fate, of being turned into a grotesque, cancerous, murderous creature.

We're burning through our remaining gas fast, and the dogs are showing no signs of slowing. If only there was somewhere to ride the bikes up and out of the crater, but it's too steep.

Suddenly, I hear a scream. I look back and see Molly's bike careening away as she and Charlie tumble to the ground.

"Charlie!" Bree screams.

The wolf-dogs pounce on them straightaway. I turn my bike around and race straight at them. Thankfully, they're scared off and run away.

I leap off the bike and run over to where Molly and Charlie are sprawled on the ground, Molly cowering over him, protecting him with her whole body. I grab her by the shoulders and roll her back. There's a huge pool of blood there.

Charlie wriggles out and flies right into Bree's arms. Molly lies there panting, gritting her teeth in agony.

The dogs have torn a hole in her calf so deep I can see the bone. The sight turns my stomach. Ryan removes his shirt and bandages her up, but it soaks up with blood within a matter of moments. He looks back at me gravely.

"We can't stay here," I say. "There could be more packs waiting to get us. Can you walk, Molly?"

She tries to stand on her bitten leg but the second she puts weight on it she cries out in pain. I look up at the sheer face of the crater. Not only are we going to have to climb, but we're going to have to carry

Molly. There's no way we'll be able to push the bikes up while carrying her at the same time. We're going to have to abandon them. From here on out, we're going by foot.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

My feet are blistered and swollen. My mouth is parched. I have no idea how long we've been walking. It feels like days. In fact, I think it has been days. The sun has set and risen several times.

With one hand, I cling onto Bree. She's so weak it reminds me of the time back in the mountain cabin when she had a fever. If she had been well enough to travel with me to the cabin I'd found, where would we be now? Would we still be safe in the mountains, hiding from the slaverunners? Would I have avoided fighting in the arenas and being forced to become a murderer? Or would we have perished in the mountains? There would always have been something waiting to finish us off. Death seems to lurk around every corner.

I don't even know if we're heading in the right direction, but I pretend that we are to the others. I don't want them to lose hope.

The metal collar around my neck is causing me sores. It weighs down heavily on my shoulders, making every step more painful than it needs to be.

Behind me, Molly stumbles along, propped up in the middle of Ryan and Ben. Her leg has become infected. There's nothing we can do. Just like Rose's arm back on the boat when we were floating in the Hudson, Molly's leg will turn gangrenous and eventually kill her. I haven't given up hope yet, but it's certainly starting to wane. Sometimes when I look back at her, I can't even tell if she's still alive, and I start to wonder if it's her ghost limping through the desert with us. Maybe we're all dead. We're all ghosts walking through purgatory.

Charlie stumbles to his knees for what must be the hundredth time. I pick him up, silently, and set him on his feet again. He doesn't say a word, just whimpers his distress. Then once more, we trudge onward.

Watching Penelope and Jack deteriorate is just as painful as watching the children struggle. The dehydration has hit them both hard. Ryan's taken to carrying Jack in a pouch across his chest, like he's a newborn baby. For the first few days he whined, but he's been quiet for a while now.

Penelope is still walking, but only just. Bree doesn't have enough strength left in her to carry the dog, even though she's small. Penelope seems to understand; she doesn't complain, but I can tell she's suffering and would love to be carried. We all would. Losing the bikes was the worst thing for all of us.

Charlie stumbles again. This time, when I go to pick him up, I find my arm muscles aren't strong enough. I fall forward too and land in a heap on the ground.

Bree falls to her knees beside me. “Brooke,” she pleads, nudging me. “Get up. You have to get up. We have to carry on.”

But something about my stumbling seems to spread to the others, as though it’s an invitation that they too can give up. Ben unlinks Molly’s arm from round his shoulders and together, he and Ryan set her on the ground. Then they both slump down themselves, their tired eyes barely able to stay open.

“No,” Bree cries, her voice choked. “We can’t give up. We can’t.”

My tongue is swollen it’s been so long since I last spoke. “Let’s just have a quick nap,” I say.

“NO!” Bree screams. But her own voice is faltering. She can only just about croak out the word.

Realizing it’s futile to protest, she lies down next to me, resting her head against my splayed out arm. Penelope lies down too, and finally lets out the pained whimper she’s been holding in for days.

“Are we going to die?” Bree whispers in my ear, stammering on her tears.

I try to shush her, to calm her down. I want to tell her that we won’t die but I know it’s a lie. We can’t go on any farther. My legs won’t support my weight. The best I’d be able to do is crawl, but my arms are too weak as well. The only thing that could save us now is a rainstorm. Maybe with a bit of hydration we’d be able to make it another mile or so. Maybe Houston is just over the horizon. But we’ll never know, because the rain will never come.

I stare up at the unforgiving sky. It is a beautiful blue, the sun a blazing yellow, but between them they signify death. I find myself secretly praying someone dies and draws the attention of vultures. Then we’d be able to shoot one and feast on it. But I feel ashamed almost as soon as I think it. It’s better that we die together rather than live with that guilt.

“Do you really think Dad is still alive?” Bree says.

Her voice is floaty and sing-songy, as though she’s becoming delirious.

“Yes,” I reply.

“Do you think he still loves us?”

I let my heavy eyelids close, the scorching sun burning the tender skin. My mind has gone back to another place, to the time when my dad left for the army. I’d come home to find him and Mom arguing about it. He’d hit her and I’d been so filled with revulsion I wouldn’t say goodbye to him. He’d told me through the door that he would always love me, no matter what.

“Of course,” I say to Bree.

She doesn’t respond. When I look over, I see that her eyes are closed.

“Brooke,” I hear Molly say.

I manage to heave myself to my elbows and look back at her. She’s holding her bad leg and breathing rapidly. Despite the heat, her face has completely drained of color. She looks like she’s at death’s door.

“I need to tell you something,” she stammers through the pain.

“What?” I say, squinting against the glare of harsh sunlight.

“The crash,” she gasps. “Zeke and Stephan… survived.”

My heart hammers in my chest. “What do you mean?”

Tears streak down Molly’s cheeks. “I’m sorry. I lied. I knew you’d never leave if you thought there was a chance we could save them.”

She’s shaking her head so frantically, making her matted ginger hair fly all over the place. She licks her parched lips. I can’t help thinking that she’s using the last ounce of strength left in her to make this confession. It’s as though she’s trying to atone before she dies, to rid herself of sin just in case she’s about to meet her maker.

My grief is all consuming. It hurts so much my stomach aches. It’s more painful than the blisters, than the gnawing starvation. It’s more painful than the car crashes and the arena fights, than the snake bite and the slavers’ whips.

I fall back against the hard, cracked desert ground, feeling completely defeated, and let my eyes close.

CHAPTER TWENTY

"Brooke. Brooke, wake up."

My eyelids flutter open. I'm flat on my back on the parched earth. I can't feel any pain at all; my whole body is comfortably numb.

There's a blanket of stars above me. I squint, trying to work out who it is standing before me. But it's impossible. The person is nothing more than a silhouette.

"Who are you?" I manage to say.

My voice is no longer parched. My tongue isn't swollen, nor are my lips dry and cracked. But it's still hard to get my words out. It's like I can't move, like I'm more than just numb, but paralyzed.

"It's me," the voice replies.

But I can't place it. It sounds like a hundred different voices in one. I can't even tell whether it's a man or a woman.

I don't know whether I'm dead or alive, awake or dreaming. All I know is that the pain has gone. I'm filled with peace and tranquility. My eyelids are so heavy, I could easily just fall back to sleep.

The person reaches out and touches my cheek with their fingers.

"Don't fall asleep, Brooke. Not now. Not yet."

As I finally place the voice, my heart clenches. Because it belongs to Rose. I can't make out her features in the darkness, I can only conjure a memory of what she looks like.

"How did you get here?" I stammer, confused by her presence.

"You brought me with you," she replies, touching my heart gently. "I'm in here."

As her hand presses into my chest, I realize that it's not Rose sitting beside me anymore. It's Flo.

"Thank you for looking after him," she says. "For taking care of Charlie all this time."

"Flo?" I stammer.

"I don't blame you, Brooke," she says. "You did everything you could for me."

She reaches down and presses a kiss to my forehead. But as she straightens up, it's no longer Flo. It's my mom looking down at me.

Disorientated and slightly panicked, I try to shake my head. My heart is fluttering, my breath coming in short, anxious gasps.

"Mom, I didn't want to leave you."

"I know," she whispers. Then she repeats the words Flo said a moment ago. "I don't blame you, Brooke. You did everything you could for me."

Emotion begins to well inside of me. All these people, all my dead friends, my mom; it's like they're saying goodbye.

I try to reach out for my mom, to touch her and feel her hand in mine, but I can't move at all. Even as I struggle against whatever invisible force is keeping me paralyzed, I can sense that the person has transformed again, that it's no longer my mom sitting beside me.

"We would have made a good team, you and me," the voice says.

It's instantly recognizable as Logan's. I gasp, but I can't see his face. How I wish I could look into his eyes one last time.

"You can let me go now, Brooke," Logan says. "You can be with him."

"With who?" I stammer.

"With whomever you choose."

I try to reach out for Logan but my arm feels like it's pinned to my side. I can't move at all.

"I don't want to choose," I say. "I can't. I don't want to hurt anyone."

"Then let fate decide," he says. "Like it did with us."

I don't know what to make of his words, but it's too late to try and decipher their meaning. His silhouette is moving, standing up and leaving an empty, yawning space beside me. Starlight illuminates the figure but doesn't show me any of his features. I don't want him to leave but I can't stop him. I watch helplessly as he paces across the desert ground, leans down, and picks up Molly in his arms.

"No!" I shout. "Don't take her! Please!"

But Logan doesn't listen. He holds Molly's limp body in his arms. Her hair splays over and swings in the breeze as he starts to walk away. Jack the dog trots along beside him.

I watch helplessly as they disappear into the distance. My heart aches. I can't tell what's real and what's not, but wherever my mind is right now, I know my body is giving up. This is what dying feels like. Like floating and falling all at once. Like a horrible, dark chasm opening up inside of you. I don't want to give up. I don't want to die here. But I don't think I get a choice. The fight is leaving me.

As I lie there, my weak arm gesturing in the direction Logan went, I see something else coming toward me. Another ghost? Another person from my past come to haunt me?

The person is drawing closer and closer. When they reach me, I notice that they're wearing army fatigues. They bend at the knees, and shadows judder against their face, obscuring their features.

"You can do better than this, soldier," the voice says.

It's my dad's voice. I recognize it instantly.

"I can't go on," I say. "I'm dying, aren't I?"

"Not on my watch, soldier."

In a split second, he disappears, taking the blanket of stars and the dark, empty sky with him. Suddenly, everything is replaced by the

blistering heat, the bright, white daylight, and the searing pain of dehydration and starvation. There's a noise in my ear like a roaring sound. It takes me a long time to realize it's the sound of an engine.

I'm in a vehicle, moving forward, bumping along. Is this another dream? I don't know what's real and what's not anymore.

"She's waking up, sir!" someone shouts.

A woman's face appears above me. She's a soldier, dressed in a US military uniform. Her face is harsh and lined, but she's looking at me in a kind way.

"Can you tell me your name?" she says.

I try to speak, but my mouth feels like it's filled with cotton wool. The soldier helps scoop my head up in her hand. She tips water from a canteen into my mouth. It's tepid, but I don't care. It tastes delicious. I still can't tell whether I'm dead or alive—but if I did pass away during the night, this is surely heaven.

"Brooke," I finally say. "Brooke Moore."

The soldier's features change right away. She looks over at someone out of my sight line.

"Did you hear that?" she says to the other person. "She says her name is Brooke Moore. You'd better call the Commander."

I reach out and grab the soldier's arm, relieved to discover I'm no longer paralyzed.

"Where's my sister?" I stammer. "My friends? Did they make it?"

The woman smiles. "They made it," she says. "And so did you. Brooke, we're taking you to your father."

PART FOUR

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

The road is bumpy, making the journey tough going. Every part of my body is aflame with pain. I slip in and out of consciousness, and each time I come around, I'm expecting to discover that it has all been a dream, that there is no US military vehicle taking us to Dad. But each time I am rewarded by the jolting sensation of the truck, by the sounds of its tires racing across the parched earth, and by the sight of the US marine as she tends to me, giving me water to sip and chewy protein bars for energy. Not long ago I was certain we were facing death, that my dead friends were appearing before my eyes in order to take me to the afterlife. Now, it is as though I've been given a second chance.

I can't believe what is happening. My dad is alive, and we have been rescued, right when it looked like the end had arrived. In my wildest dreams, I never imagined it would happen this way.

The truck I'm traveling in is part of a convoy. For reasons I don't fully understand yet, we're all traveling separately. I think of Bree and pray that she is being cared for as well as I am. I wonder if she's been told that our dad is alive yet, or whether she knows we're on our way to be reunited with him. I try to picture her reaction; I know she won't have held back her tears in the way I did. At the very least, I hope she's with Charlie, that the two of them are together, perhaps even with Penelope beside them. I don't dare let myself consider that the dog may not have survived, though I know it's a possibility.

I hear the sound of brakes and start to feel the truck slowing down.

"What's happening?" I say to the soldier who has been caring for me.

I try to sit up but she guides me back down.

"We're at the compound," she explains. "There are checkpoints to go through. Don't worry. We'll be there very soon."

I try to relax but it's almost impossible. I feel like I did when I was a little child waiting for my dad to come home after being stationed abroad for months. Only the sensation inside of me is a thousand times stronger than it was when I was younger, because it hasn't been months, it has been years. And while the concept of my dad dying while he was away was scary when I was younger, it still seemed abstract and unimaginable. But I've spent the last four years assuming I will never ever see him again. The sensation inside of me is more akin to discovering that someone has come back from the dead.

I can hear the sound of a chain-link fence being opened. Then the truck picks up speed and we're bobbing along once again. The jolting

movement smooths out and I know that means we're riding on asphalt, that we're on a proper road again. I wonder if it's a new road, built after the war, or if the people of the compound managed to protect one that was already there. Nothing else in the south seemed to have survived the bombs, so I presume that means they've been rebuilding.

There are many more checkpoints to pass through, and row after row of fencing. If I'd thought Fort Noix was heavy-handed with its layers of guards and outposts, it was nothing compared to this. The fences are tall and topped with barbed wire. Guards are positioned all along them, though from where I am lying prone in the truck I can only see the tops of their heads. But I recognize their uniforms and the insignia of the marines. It gives me a sense of enormous familiarity and nostalgia.

"This is the last checkpoint," the soldier informs me. "Then we're heading straight to the Commander. Your dad, I mean."

My dad, a commander. I shouldn't be so surprised. If anyone was going to survive the war and find a way to thrive in spite of it, it was going to be my dad.

I'm surprised to see the tips of trees above me as the truck crawls past the final fence. I'd become so accustomed to the barren desert landscape that the sight of green leaves is shocking. Then, I'm certain in the distance I can hear the sound of running water.

"How do you have trees?" I say. "And water?"

The soldier smiles. "The Commander has turned this place into Eden," she explains. "We're completely self-sufficient."

As I absorb her words, my first feeling is relief. If they're self-sufficient here then there's no need for scavenging, no dangerous hunting trips out into the wild.

"Do you take in survivors?" I ask.

The soldier looks at me kindly. "Brooke, I know you have a lot of questions. But I don't want you to tire yourself out. Why don't you rest and gather your strength for when you see your dad?"

I know she's right but I can't help myself. The sensations inside of me are too great. They all vie for my attention, mixing around in my stomach and making me nauseous. My exhausted body is telling me to rest and recuperate, but my frantic mind is racing through a million thoughts. I'm filled with excitement, but at the same time I'm nervous. I haven't forgotten the sound of my dad's hand as he slapped my mom's cheek the night he left us, voluntarily, to join a war that went on to obliterate everything. Is he even still the same man I remember?

Just then, the truck jolts to a halt.

"We're here," the soldier says.

She stands and starts unlatching the flap at the back of the truck.

I'm suddenly overcome with fear. What if my dad isn't the person I want him to be? What if he's been traumatized by the last four and a half years? He said he would always love me no matter what, but that was before the slaverunners and the arenas and the crazies. That was before the nuclear bombs and the fighter jets.

"Are you having trouble standing?" the soldier asks.

I am, but not in the way she thinks. She thinks I've been weakened by my ordeal out in the desert. In reality, my legs seem to have turned to jelly beneath me. My whole body trembles as she helps me to my feet, guiding me by my elbow down onto a step, then down again onto the ground.

I'm standing on paving slabs with moss growing up between them. I can smell grass and vegetation, and hear the sound of running water in the distance. The air is cool, not like the painful, sweltering heat of the Texan desert I've just come from.

I feel the soldier put gentle pressure on my shoulder, and I can feel that she's urging me on. Another truck has pulled up beside me, and Bree is being led down to the ground, trembling in much the same way as me. When she sees me, her eyes brim with tears. I know Dad always told me not to cry, but the sight of her alive makes me well up. I can still hear her screams in my head as she begged me not to give up back in the desert, to keep moving. I couldn't do it for her. I'm only here by a miracle. But if she holds any resentment toward me because of it, she doesn't show it. She rushes over and throws herself into my arms. She's been patched up well by the soldier she rode with, and is no longer as feeble as she was back in the desert.

"Did they tell you?" she says through her sobs. "Dad is alive."

"They told me," I gasp, stroking her hair beneath my fingers.

"You were right, Brooke. You were right all along."

I was. But people still died because of me. I will have to live with that guilt for the rest of my life.

Finally, Bree lets me go. I can see the other trucks pulling up behind us, and see Ben emerge from one. He looks as frail as he did when we first got to know each other back in the prisons of Arena 1. But he has transformed since then. He is leaner, more muscular, and the sensitivity I could always see in his eyes seems to have hardened. Like me, survival has taken its toll on him.

Bree slips her hand in mine, pulling me back to the moment. I turn away from the trucks. As much as I want to see each of our friends arrive safely, I know my dad is waiting for me. I can't prolong this anymore. It's time to face him.

The soldier who'd been riding with me gestures past some palm trees.

"He's over there," she says.

Bree and I squeeze one another's hands as we take small steps along the paving slabs. The vegetation grows thicker and lusher as we go, forming a thick canopy above that plunges us into cooling shadows. Then all at once, I see a figure.

We stop dead. There is a man down the path. He's wearing a military uniform. His hair is completely gray. He stands with his hands resting just lightly behind his back. I know the stance. "At ease." It is my dad.

I can't get the words out. I try to call to him but the only noise that comes from my throat is a croak.

It's enough for him to hear. He spins to face us. There is no denying it; though time has aged him considerably, the man standing before me is my dad.

"Brooke," he gasps, staring at me like he can't believe what he is seeing. "Bree."

And then we're running, both of us, full speed, finding reserves of energy from deep within our weakened bodies. Dad spreads his arms wide and we run into them. He sweeps us tightly into him. He feels so solid, so real. This is not the man in my dreams; this is my real dad, alive and strong.

I don't want to show my weakness in front of him, but Bree is sobbing uncontrollably, and I just cannot hold back anymore. My tears begin to fall.

We're all shaking with emotion. I clutch onto Bree and nestle my head into the crook of my dad's neck, letting my tears drop onto his uniform one by one. It is then that I realize, for the first time in my entire life, my dad is crying too.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

We stay like that for a long time, holding one another and weeping. It is like we never want to let go.

"You've both grown so much," Dad says finally, drawing back to look at us. He looks Bree up and down. "Eleven years old," he says, shaking his head as though in disbelief. She was seven last time he saw her. Then he looks at me. "Seventeen."

I nod. I wish he could have seen us back when we were in Fort Noix. We were healthy then, our muscles stronger, our hair and bodies clean. He would have been able to see firsthand how well I've looked after Bree. Instead, she looks more like a mangy cat.

"You've changed too," I say.

He laughs, sadly, and points to his gray hair. "I look older."

It's been four years since we last saw each other, but Dad seems to have aged so much more. The stress of war has taken its toll on him.

He reaches up to wipe a strand of hair tenderly from off my face. "I didn't think I'd ever see you again, Brooke," he says. "But I never gave up hope. I thought of you, both of you, every single day."

Tears blur my vision.

"How long has the camp been here?" I ask. "Is it yours? Did you build it?"

I know I sound like an eager child, but I want to know everything that has happened to him over the last four and a half years. How he came to defect from the army and create this place.

But Dad puts a finger to his lips to quiet me, and smiles. "We can talk about everything later. But first I think you should go to the hospital for health checks."

He eyes the metal collar around my neck, which has given me sores and rashes.

Bree slides her hand into his and holds on tight. "Will you come with us?" she asks.

"Of course," he says, kindly, smiling down at her.

While in the medical ward, I finally have the metal collar removed from around my neck. It feels like a huge weight has been lifted from my shoulders. The doctor gives me an ointment to help the wounds heal.

"Can we see our friends?" I ask the doctor as I take another gulp of the sugar and saltwater solution she's given me.

"Please," Bree adds.

The doctor looks at Dad for his approval. I can't help but swell with pride, seeing the way everyone looks up to him. He is clearly

well respected.

Dad nods, and the doctor leads us through the ward to where Charlie is sleeping, with Penelope sitting on the end of his bed.

"That's Charlie," Bree tells Dad with an air of pride. "Brooke rescued him from an arena. And this is Penelope."

She strokes the Chihuahua behind the ear. Despite the ordeal we've been through, Penelope is looking well. If it weren't for her missing eye, she would look the picture of perfect health.

"You do have pets here, don't you?" Bree asks Dad, wide-eyed.

"Of course," he replies.

"Phew," she says, clearly relieved to know we won't have to fight to keep Penelope like we did with the Commander in Fort Noix.

Charlie murmurs and opens his eyes. As soon as he sees Bree, he breaks into a huge grin. Bree hugs him tightly and Penelope snuggles in. The three of them stay like that for a long, long time.

"It was touch and go," the doctor informs me. "His dehydration was so severe he had a seizure."

I press my hand to my mouth, alarmed at the thought of poor, sweet Charlie fitting.

"Will he be okay?" I ask.

The doctor nods. "He's had the same fluid solution as you and Bree. He's on the mend."

I'm so relieved to know Charlie will be okay. I don't know what Bree would do without him.

In the next bed along is Ben. His usually pale skin has been badly sunburned, making him a very sore-looking red color. Parts of his skin have been bandaged to stop the blisters from becoming infected.

"Ben," I say, taking his hand. "This is my dad, Laurence."

My dad would never shake hands with someone. Instead, he salutes Ben.

"Ben was living on Catskills Mountain, too," I tell Dad. "He helped me rescue Bree from the slaverunners."

Despite his sunburn, I can see Ben blush. "Only because Brooke helped save me from Arena One," he says shyly.

I can see my dad's eyebrows rise. He's not usually one for outward emotion, but I can practically see the questions in his eyes asking me how, exactly, we escaped from an arena. I'm almost excited at the prospect of telling him that we didn't just escape, but that I killed three of their most prized fighters *and* then killed their leader, all while snake venom swirled in my bloodstream.

"I look forward to getting to know you, Ben," Dad says.

"You too, sir," Ben replies, looking as awkward as a boy meeting his prom date's parents. Then he tips his eyes to me. "You did it, Brooke," he whispers, squeezing my hand tightly in his. I can see tears

glittering in the corners of his soft, blue eyes. “I always believed in you.”

I squeeze his hand back, overcome with emotion.

Next I take my dad over to Ryan’s bed. It’s only now in this clean hospital setting that I realize how disheveled Ryan has become since we left Fort Noix. His hair has grown a little longer, softening his look. Normally, he’d be the sort of clean-shaven, buzz-cut kind of guy my dad would immediately respect. But with his unkempt appearance he looks much more boylike. His arm is in a sling, his dislocated shoulder having been injured further by supporting the weight of Molly and having to carry Jack.

“Where is Jack?” I ask, expecting to see him sleeping on the end of the bed like Penelope was with Charlie.

Ryan looks at me sadly. “He didn’t make it,” he says.

Bree lets out a sob. Grief washes over me. Jack had been a trusted ally, fighting side by side with us since day one. He even saved our lives back in the tunnels in Toledo. To have lost him now seems so unfair.

“I’m so sorry,” I say to Ryan, squeezing his good arm.

He nods, but I can tell he’s not ready to talk about it. Jack was his best friend. When others died around him, Ryan always had Jack. The loss will take a long time to heal.

“Where’s Molly?” I say, realizing that the bed beside Ryan’s is empty.

But before he has a chance to answer, I look up and see a shock of ginger hair peeking through a gap in a curtain around a bed a few down from where we stand. I’m in two minds about seeing Molly again. Because of her, Stephan and Zeke were left behind in Memphis. If Molly hadn’t lied, perhaps I’d have been able to save them. But despite the feelings of anger inside of me, I’m glad that she’s here. Molly had it worse than any of us back in the desert. She is my friend, after all, and no matter how disappointed I am in the decision she made back in Memphis, I still love her.

I prepare myself for the sight that awaits me, knowing full well her leg will have been amputated because of the bite she sustained from the radiated wild dogs. But as I approach her bed, the doctor quickly rushes over and blocks me from proceeding.

“Brooke, maybe it’s time for another saline solution,” she says.

“In a minute,” I reply, trying to move past her. “I need to see Molly first.”

The doctor becomes more insistent. “I really think you should have another drink now. Please, this way.”

Bree can tell something’s up. She ducks past the doctor quick as a flash and hauls open the curtain surrounding Molly. As I look over the

doctor's shoulder, I see Bree suddenly halt and gasp.

"Bree," I say, feeling my heart begin to thump. "What is it?"

The doctor finally drops her arms and sighs loudly. "Your friend didn't survive," she tells me.

The words hit me like a punch in the gut. "What?" I cry, barging past her. My stomach churns as I hobble over to Molly's bedside.

She's covered in a white sheet, and her skin is so pale it makes her ginger hair even more strikingly red. She looks peaceful in death in a way she never did in life. It's like her fight is finally over.

"The bite on her leg was too infected," the doctor explains, coming up beside me. "Even amputation couldn't have saved her. We gave her pain relief and then she slipped away. I didn't want you to know in case it caused too much shock to your system. I'm sorry."

Bree and I stand side by side, looking over Molly's lifeless body.

Dad grips my shoulder. "I'm so sorry," he says. "We will give her a proper funeral."

Bree leans down and kisses Molly's cold cheek.

"Come on," Dad says, guiding us gently away from Molly. "I think it's time to go home."

Home. The word echoes in my mind, feeling unreal to me. I can hardly believe we have a home again. A real home. That for the first time in four years, we will be a family again.

Dad leads us out of the hospital and through the compound. Everyone we pass salutes him. He is so well respected and it fills me with pride to be his daughter.

"So you were living in the mountain cabin?" Dad asks as we walk.

"Yes," I say. "Bree and me. Sasha too. She was killed by slaverunners."

He looks downcast. "I didn't think to look for you there," he says.

"What do you mean?" I say, frowning.

"I came back for you," he says.

A pit opens up in my stomach. I made us leave home. I told Mom there was no point waiting for him anymore, that he'd left us for good. I'd been wrong.

"It was my fault we left," I stammer. "I thought you would never come back for us."

Dad squeezes my shoulder. "You did the right thing, Brooke," he tells me. "When I got back, the place was bombed. The whole street. If you'd stayed, you would have died." His voice becomes quieter. "I thought that maybe you had."

I shake my head. "We were in the mountains all that time. For four years. We only left about six or seven months ago."

"I'm impressed with how well you coped," he says.

I shrug. "I didn't have much choice."

Dad falls silent. I hadn't meant the comment to be pointed, but my anger at him abandoning us is evident in my tone.

"Here's the house," Dad says, gesturing to a brick bungalow. "Let's get inside. You can wash while I make something to eat."

I raise an eyebrow. "You cook?"

It sounds so domestic. So unlike my father.

"Badly," he replies. "But yes, I cook."

He opens up the door to the bungalow and we all go inside. When we'd entered Neena's house back at Fort Noix, I'd been overwhelmed by the smallest of things—the real pillow and duvet, the chest of drawers, clean clothes. But entering Dad's house is even more surreal. It looks like a completely normal house, like the ones that existed before the war blew them to smithereens. He shows us the living room, the bathroom, the bedrooms, each one furnished and decorated.

"I can't believe this place," I say, awestruck by the fact that this will actually get to be our home, that we can live in this place together as a family.

We follow Dad into the kitchen.

"Do you girls like bread?" he says. "Jam?"

"I love jam!" Bree exclaims. "Brooke once found a house in the mountains full of provisions. She brought me back a jar of jam. It was delicious."

Dad smiles. He seems proud of me, of my resourcefulness and the way I took care of my sister. It's the best feeling in the world.

We sit down and tuck into the jam sandwiches, relaying stories about the time I managed to get sap from the tree, how I drove his old motorbike and sidecar down the mountainside at 100 miles an hour without crashing, and how I hunted a deer. But the more we speak, the harder it becomes for me to ignore the dark cloud hanging over us. The unspoken words seem to be swelling around us, crushing down on us. None of us wants to talk about it, to rip the scab off that old wound. But I can't help myself. I need answers. I need to know why he abandoned us all those years ago.

"Why did you leave us, Dad?" I finally blurt out.

Bree stiffens, immediately awkward. Dad sits silently for a long, long time, his hands laced together on the table. He looks so much older than I remember. Not only is his face more lined and his hair completely gray, but there's a stoop in his posture that was never there when I was younger. It's a vulnerability he would once have never allowed me to see.

"I was barely fourteen," I continue. "Bree was seven. How could you abandon us like that? Why did you choose the war over us?"

Dad doesn't look at me when he finally speaks. "It's complicated, Brooke. I know you think I chose the war, but I didn't. I chose you

two, I always did. I chose to give you a future, and that meant leaving you in the present and fighting in the war."

"But it hadn't even begun yet," I shoot back, anger making the volume of my voice rise. "You *volunteered*. You left before you even needed to."

"I had to put myself in the best strategic position," he says, sighing heavily. "I don't expect you to understand. But know that I'm sorry for the hurt I caused you two—"

"And Mom," I interrupt. "Or did you forget about how you slapped her the night before you left?"

He looks away, ashamed. "I haven't forgotten. And I've regretted it every day that's passed."

"You know she waited for you," I say, and I can hear the bitterness in my voice. "Even after the mushroom cloud. She said we couldn't leave, in case you came back. You hit her and she still died for you."

Bree begins to weep softly beside me. I know she wants me to stop but I can't help myself. All the rage and anger I've felt over the last few years is spilling out of me. There's no amount of apologies Dad can say to atone for the death of our mom, or make up for the fact that I had to leave her to her certain death and look after Bree alone. Because of him I had to grow up overnight, make adult decisions, and live with the consequences. I was just a kid and his actions robbed me of my childhood.

"I understand if you never forgive me," Dad says. "But I had to be right in the thick of it in order to fight it from the inside out."

I pause and frown. I'm confused, not able to comprehend what he's saying.

"What do you mean, 'fight it from the inside out'?" I say.

"The compound," he explains. "What we're doing here. We're building an army. A resistance to both sides of the war. We're working to take the system down from the inside out. It's a long, slow process. Once we're strong enough, we'll take control of all the cities, destroy all the arenas, and bring the slaverunners to justice. But first we need to unite all the other pockets of resistance across the country. We've been trying to communicate with all the other resistance groups that we know of. It's only when we're together that we can fight and win."

My heart begins to thud. "The radio message to Fort Noix. That *was* you?"

He nods. "We're making contact with every base we can. There are resistors all over the country. We created compounds because we knew the war would mean mutually assured destruction. We knew it was the only chance we'd have of restoring civilization once it was all over."

My mind swirls with emotions. “You mean, you left… you volunteered for the army because…”

“Because it was inevitable and I knew it couldn’t be stopped,” he says, sternly. “Because I knew the only way the human race would survive was by making sure there were still people alive after it was all over. And now we’re almost ready to reclaim the country.”

I can’t believe it. It really is a dream come true. All I’ve wanted, ever since meeting Trixie in the forest, is to create a safe world for everyone; a world free from slaverunners and crazies. A world free from arenas.

“When is it happening?” I say, slamming my fists onto the table. “When are you reclaiming the country?”

Dad looks at me. “It’s a strategic military operation, Brooke. I can’t reveal that to you.”

“I want to help,” I say, determined.

“I’m glad to hear it. There’s plenty to do around here and—”

“No,” I say, cutting him off. “I want to fight.”

“Brooke,” he begins.

“I’ve survived two arenas, Dad,” I say. “I’m a fighter now, the fighter you always wanted me to be. I can do this. Whatever it takes to get justice, I want to do it.”

He looks at me hesitantly. But he can tell I’m not backing down. I’m not the fourteen-year-old girl he abandoned all those years ago. I’m a young woman now, one who can hold her own, one who’s taken all the lessons he taught me and used them again and again and again to survive. I’m stronger than he ever thought possible.

“Well, all right,” he says, finally. “If you really want to fight, I won’t stop you. We need all the help we can get.”

“Good,” I say, standing.

“Where are you going?” Dad asks.

“To join the rest of the soldiers,” I say. “There’s a meeting about to happen, isn’t there?”

I raise an eyebrow. Dad gives me a look of disbelief, but he doesn’t challenge me. Instead, he stands from the table.

“Lead the way, Moore.”

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

The meeting is taking place in one of the vast underground rooms of the compound. When my dad enters, all the soldiers stop talking and rise to their feet and salute. Then Dad steps aside and lets me into the room. Though they try not to react, I can almost feel the ripple of confusion as it passes down the line. Everyone's wondering who this beat-up girl is and what she's doing here.

"This is my eldest daughter, Brooke," Dad says. "She's joining us."

I hobble into the room and take a seat. I am by far the youngest person here. Though there are plenty of women, most are like the soldier I met in the back of the truck; hardened, bulky, emotionless. I stick out like a sore thumb. I'll be relieved once I'm given a US Marine Corps uniform to replace the strange, stiff, homemade uniform of Fort Noix that I am still wearing. For the first time, I wish I hadn't been so hasty in demanding to join in the meeting. I could have really done with a hot bath, a hair brush, a proper sleep, and a change of clothes. But just like when I was a kid, I find myself wanting to please my dad, to do everything right and be the daughter he always wanted me to be. I know, now, after my ordeal and everything I've survived, I am so close to making that a reality.

I can tell that the atmosphere in the room has changed. Everyone is a little wary of me. I'm not surprised, to be honest. Just like the Commander at Fort Noix, the people here have learned to be suspicious of everyone. There's probably more than just a flicker of doubt in the back of each of their minds, questioning whether I really am who I say I am or if their grief-stricken Commander has let in some kind of slaverunner spy. I will just have to prove myself to them and earn their trust and respect.

"Please," my dad says. "Resume your meeting."

The General nods obediently and walks over to a map of Texas hanging up on a board.

"This is Arena Three," he says. "Our target."

I can feel a coldness spread through my body at the thought of another arena. There must be so many all across America now, filled with kids like me forced to fight to the death.

"We've been in strategic communication with the compound up in Massachusetts," the General continues. "We're preparing to coordinate a large-scale attack on Arena One and Arena Two in New York, while at the same time taking down Arena Three, here in Texas. We have only one shot to get it right. We've amassed enough bombs and weapons to eradicate all three. Once the first three arenas fall, it won't take long to break the stranglehold of the other, smaller ones

across the country. A coordinated attack on the major arenas is step one in the liberation of the people of America."

I hadn't fully understood the arenas and how they came about before now, but as I listen in on the meeting, I start to comprehend the logistics behind the war. The first two arenas weren't for bloodsport at all, but mass public executions. Different sides of the civil war had different strongholds in the north and south. Anyone who opposed the dominant group in the north were taken to the arenas and killed. In retaliation for their people's slaughter, Arena 3 in the south turned the public execution of rebels into a vicious game. It was a form of retaliation for what was happening to their sympathizers in the north. The north responded with more bloodshed, turning the arenas into perverse battlegrounds. This all had the effect of making the arena places for survivors to congregate. As more and more people died and the different sides slowly obliterated one another, the arenas became the central hub of the remaining cities, and the survivors who'd gone there had a choice: join the brutal new societies or die.

I remember the moment back in Arena 1 when I'd been offered the opportunity to join them. I'd chosen to face death instead. I wish others had been as strong when the moment counted. Perhaps if they had, the cities wouldn't have gotten such a strong hold over what remained of civilization.

The General moves over to another board, this one showing a picture of a small electronic device.

"This is the GPS tracker which needs to be placed in each of the arenas in order to guide the bombs. Once detonated, they will completely eradicate the arena and the city around it entirely. Over a hundred thousand people will die in each attack."

The thought of all those deaths makes my stomach turn. But I also know it's a necessary evil. Fighting war with war doesn't sound like it makes much sense but I understand why it has to be this way.

As the conversation turns to strategy and how, exactly, we can get the GPS devices inside, I am hit by a sudden moment of clarity.

"Send me into the arena," I say, before my brain has even had time to catch up to my mouth.

Silence falls. Everyone looks at me. I can feel their eyes burning into me.

"I'm sorry?" the General says. I can almost hear the derision in his voice. He's wondering what a seventeen-year-old girl can do in an arena built for slaughter.

"I've fought in them before," I add. "They'll all know my name, all recognize my face. I'll be able to walk right in there. Everyone will want to see me fight. I'll be able to draw every single person in the

city into one place. Once I'm there, I can activate your GPS device."

It's my dad who speaks first. "How will you get back out again?" he says.

I can feel my hands trembling. I don't want them to. This is my moment, I have to be brave so that everyone knows I can do this.

"I've done it before," I say.

I can tell Dad is growing tenser. "That doesn't mean you can do it again," he says.

"I know. And if I can't, you'll just have to blow the place up with me still inside."

There's a perceptible change in the atmosphere as everyone realizes what it is I'm offering. Instead of sending a group of soldiers into the city and risking all their lives, I'm offering to infiltrate, to allow myself to be caught. I'm offering to return to the worst place I've ever had the misfortune of entering in my entire life, without the guarantee of coming out the other end, just for their cause. I can feel the respect of the soldiers in the room begin to build.

"You don't have to do this just to prove a point, Brooke," my dad is saying.

I shake my head. "I'm not," I say. "I'm doing it because I can. Because I'm the best person to do it. You said we get one chance, that we only have enough weapons for one attack. So let me draw everyone to one place. It will increase our chances of success, won't it?"

My dad can't argue against me. He knows I'm right.

"Let me do this," I say again, firmly. "It's the right thing to do. If we don't take these cities down, if we don't eradicate the arenas and the slaverunners, then survivors will keep being tortured and enslaved. Children will keep being taken for the mines, for the sex trade."

My voice falters as I think of Ben's brother whisked away on a train for the mines beneath Grand Central. I have to do this for him, and for everyone else who died because of this stupid, brutal war.

I can tell I have the support of the rest of the soldiers. But I've put my dad in a difficult position, because now he has to fight between his heart and his head. He has to decide whether to listen to the father in him who is inevitably telling him not to let his daughter do this, or the commander in him who knows this is the best chance they're ever going to get.

Eventually, he stands, having made his decision.

"Brooke's right," he says. "She's in by far the best position to infiltrate Arena Three."

And with that, I have sealed my fate. For the third time in my short life, I am heading back into the arena.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

I'm raring to go, but the doctor tells me I have to wait a week until I can go on any missions at all. My body was so badly damaged from the time I spent in the desert, I will need to give it time to recuperate. I spend the days in the hospital with my friends, sharing memories of those we lost along the way. I know none of them want me to leave, to do what I have to do, but they know better than to argue with me. If I die on this mission, it's a sacrifice I am willing to make.

Finally, the day comes when I am to leave. Dad has been in communication with the other compound in Massachusetts in order to coordinate our efforts. The time is now. Today is the day the world will be reborn.

I stand in the meeting room deep beneath the compound, the walls lined with blueprints and strategic maps. For the first time, I am wearing my US Marine Corps uniform. I feel a surge of pride to be standing before my dad in this uniform. Though he doesn't show it on his face, I know he is proud of me too.

"There's no need for you to take weapons," Dad says. "Anything you take will be stolen by the slaverunners as soon as you're captured. It's better for them not to get their hands on any weaponry. But I want you to have this, just in case you run into any crazies along the way."

He holds out a knife. It is the same one I used back on Catskills Mountain, the one that helped keep me and Bree alive and fed for four long years. It was taken from me back in Arena 1. I hadn't realized how much symbolic value I'd placed on that knife until now, as I hold its replica in my hands.

I stash the knife away and swallow down the emotion in my throat.

"This is your GPS chip," Dad says, placing a small device securely in my pocket. "Once you're inside the vicinity of the arena, activate it. It will be our signal to launch the bombs and the tracker inside will guide them to the right spot. Then you'll have five minutes to get out. So as soon as it's activated you need to get the hell out of there. Do you understand me, Brooke? No matter what happens, don't let them take you into the arena to fight."

I understand what he's saying. If I end up fighting in the arena, there's no way I'll make it out in five minutes. I'll be at the mercy of whatever fighters they decide to throw at me. It would be a suicide mission. I pray it doesn't come to that, but I also know I'm willing to give myself up if it does.

It's time to go. I begin the long walk through the underground

corridors, then I'm up into the compound, surrounded by trees and vegetation. It feels so strange standing in this beautiful Eden in a military uniform. That war must exist for peace to prevail is a concept I can hardly wrap my head around.

Up in the compound, my friends have been allowed out of the hospital to see me off. Ryan has shaved his head again, and he gives me his confident, cocky smile. For the first time in a long time, he looks like the Ryan I first met at Fort Noix, the only difference being the sling around his arm and the absence of Jack.

Charlie has bounced back to full strength remarkably. I hug him goodbye, knowing that Flo is watching down on us, grateful that I have gotten him this far.

Ben is still weak from our ordeal. He was always the gentler, more sensitive of us, and it stands to reason that the toll the desert took on his body would be greater than the toll it took on mine. I feel bad for leaving him when he's still vulnerable, but I know Ben can look after himself, even if his mournful blue eyes are silently pleading with me not to go. Like always, the words we want to speak to each other seem bound up, tied in our throats. Ben and I always struggled to talk about the shared experiences we'd been through, and I vow in that moment that if I make it out of the arena alive, I will open up to him about everything. But for now, I take his hand in mine, noting how the skin has become soft again thanks to a week resting in the hospital, and press a kiss onto the back of it, just like he did with me when we first parted ways all those months ago. Back then he went off searching for his brother, while I went after Bree. Now we're parting ways again, united in our goal, knowing that the whole future of the world is resting on my shoulders.

Then it's only Bree and Dad left to say goodbye to. Bree is holding onto Penelope, clutching her against her chest. She looks like a little girl again, like the seven-year-old I raised on the mountainside, the girl who relied on me for everything. It's as though being back in our dad's presence has allowed her to regress. She can claim back those childhood years she lost again. I wish I could do the same.

I bend down so my eyes are level with her and Penelope. I address the one-eyed dog first, rubbing her behind the ear.

"Take care of Bree while I'm gone," I say.

Penelope tips her head to the side as though she's taking in everything I'm saying. Then she licks Bree's face, lapping up the salty tears that are rolling down her cheeks.

"I wish you didn't have to go," Bree stammers. "I wish there was another way."

"I know," I say. "So do I. But this is the last fight, Bree. After this, the world will begin to heal again. I'll be able to heal again."

She doesn't say what we are both thinking; that there is a chance I might not make it back at all.

I pull her into me, hugging her tightly. Over my shoulder, I catch sight of Charlie watching me. I know he'll take care of Bree if I don't return. She'll have Charlie and Penelope and Dad. If there was any time for me to disappear from her life, it would be now.

I let go of her and straighten up before my own tears have a chance to fall. I can hardly bear to look into her sorrowful eyes, and so I don't. I move along, pain swirling in my gut, and come face to face with my dad.

In unison, we salute.

"Commander," I say.

"Good luck, soldier," he says.

Then he reaches forward and pulls me into a tight embrace. "You can do this, Brooke," he says into my ear. "I believe in you."

"Thank you, Dad," I whisper back.

And then there's nothing left to do but to mount my motorcycle and head off into the desert, alone. I kick the engine to life and rev, making fumes spew out behind me. Then I'm off, heading away from the compound, away from the Eden my dad has created. I am leaving behind everything I care about.

I decide not to look back.

* * *

The Texas sunshine is blistering hot. It's the height of midday and the sun's rays are burning into me. Being back in the desert makes me uncomfortable. It brings back all those horrible memories, of the wild dog attack, of the slave city in the crater of Memphis. I try not to think about all that I've endured because it just serves to remind me that what I'm about to do is only the first step in reclaiming the planet. Ridding the world of slaver cities and crazies and mutated creatures will take far, far longer to do. Eradicating the arenas is just the catalyst needed to start that process.

I head west toward San Antonio, where Arena 3 is located. Remarkably, the road is still intact. It will barely take me three hours to reach the city. Which means that in three hours' time, I'll be heading back into an arena, back into the place of my nightmares. But for now, everything is peaceful. The road stretches on forever, seemingly into oblivion. There is nothing left of the civilization that once used this route. No gas stations at the side of the road, no fields growing crops. There's just desert as far as the eye can see, and above it a cloudless blue sky. If there was anything that could make me feel

insignificant, it would be driving along this road alone.

I have to remind myself that I am not insignificant at all. Right now, I am a very important cog in a machine that will change the course of the world forever. I know that elsewhere in the country, there are other soldiers like me, riding motorcycles alone down endless, straight roads, heading toward other cities and other arenas.

As time passes, I feel my anxiety growing. It's forming a knot in my stomach. There is so much resting on my shoulders, the pressure is almost too great to handle. But then, all at once, I see San Antonio appearing on the horizon and a strange sense of calm settles over me. I feel like I was always meant to be here. I was always meant to do this. Every road I have traveled, every decision I have made, every person, crazy, and creature I have fought, every friend I have lost, it was all to take me to this exact place, this exact moment. I am about to face my destiny.

Then I see it, appearing out of the distance. Arena 3. It is enormous, rising up from the ashes of the city that once thrived here, casting a shadow over everyone who still lives here. Light glitters off its metallic surfaces. It is by far the most imposing arena I have seen yet.

But my time to dwell has come to an end, because all at once, as though appearing from nowhere, several motorcycles appear and surround me. Their riders are dressed all in black and they each have gun trained on me. Slaverunners.

I kill the engine of my bike and slowly get off, my hands raised into a truce position. I'm surprised by how completely calm I am. My heartbeat has hardly increased at all.

The slaverunners approach me cautiously, as though expecting me to pull a weapon out. But when they frisk me, all they find is the knife. Once again, my Marine Corps branded weapon is stolen from me. This time, I know I will get it back again. I will survive. Because I'm not doing this alone; I have a whole army behind me. Somewhere back in Houston a red light on a machine is relaying my GPS's coordinates back to a room full of soldiers.

"What have we got here then?" one of the slaverunners says to me.

"My name is Brooke," I say. "I'm a fighter. The only person to have survived Arena One."

The slaverunner raises his eyebrows as though in disbelief. "Is that so? A slight little thing like you?" His face is so close to mine I can smell his breath.

I set my jaw firm. "You could've asked their leader if I hadn't killed him."

There's a murmur around the rest of the slaverunners. News of

my victory over the leader in Arena 1 must have filtered down south. The man questioning me frowns, studying my face.

"What are you doing here?" he says. "How'd you make it all the way to Texas if you were fighting in Manhattan?"

"I've been touring the arenas," I lie. "Giving the spectators what they want to see: the famous Brooke Moore."

He looks at me skeptically, as though not sure whether to buy my story. But since I'm not packing any weapons, I'm not exactly a threat. They have no reason not to cuff me.

I don't resist as my hands are wrenched behind my back, nor when I'm marched toward a bike. In fact, as I'm sat on the back, heading down the road toward the arena, I smile to myself.

Game on.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

It is like déjà vu, like stepping into a nightmare. The sounds of the arena, the metallic smell of blood in the air, it all brings back such horrible memories. Since it's midday, there are no fights taking place yet and so no crowds to satisfy. It means I don't need to worry about accidentally being thrust into an arena anytime soon. It also means I have plenty of time to plant my device and plot my escape. We need everyone in the arena before I set off the device because we only have one chance to destroy the city and the people within it.

But it also means the place is more or less silent. The only noises I can hear, other than our boots as we march along, are the crazed screams of the prisoners deep in the bowels of the arena.

The slaverunners lead me far underground, along winding corridor after winding corridor. They seem thrilled to have found me and keep grinning to one another, rubbing their hands with glee. I despise every single one of them. The farther I go underground, the stuffier it becomes. The prisoners kept down here aren't afforded any kind of ventilation system, and the air is thick with the smell of sweat, urine, and terror. The cries become louder the closer I get to the cells. I try to keep my emotions deep inside, but my heart breaks for them.

As I go, I mentally map out the whole route, every corner we turn, every staircase we descend, committing everything to memory. I'll need to know the exact route to take to get back to the surface when the time comes. Five minutes is all I'll have to escape the arena before the bombs obliterate it. So the whole time I walk, I take mental pictures of every single twist and turn, every little chink in the brickwork, anything that will help me find my way to the surface.

It grows darker and darker with each new corridor I'm led down. The place is lit only with emergency lights which bathe everything in a grimy dark yellow light. It's hard to believe how harsh the light is on the surface down here.

My captors don't speak to me. They just prod me along, like an animal, like I'm less than human. I keep my chin high, not about to give them any kind of satisfaction for their bad treatment of me. Then they draw to a halt outside of a large steel door. One of the guards takes out a key and unlocks the door. It swings open and I'm kicked in the small of my back. I stumble inside and fall to my knees, colliding with the hard cement ground. Before the door is slammed harshly behind me, just enough light streams in from outside for me to see the gaunt, hollow faces of the prisoners locked up inside. Then the doors are locked behind me, and we are plunged back into darkness.

The smell in here is horrendous. There must be at least a hundred

prisoners in here all crammed together, chained, sitting in their own dirt and filth. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that no one inside here has washed since being locked up. Being so close to them brings awful memories flooding back to me, of the gnawing hunger I felt when I was locked up in Arena 1, and of the heavy cuffs around my wrists. I feel nothing but empathy for them all. But I don't speak to anyone. I'm not here to make friends. If I so much as let myself care for anyone inside here, I could jeopardize the whole mission. Everyone here is going to die. They're collateral damage to a grander plan.

It shocks me to hear myself thinking this way. I really have turned into Flo. She didn't care who she hurt as long as she survived. At the time, I hated her for it. But now I understand. And I understand, too, why my dad did what he did. Sometimes small acts of evil build up to greater acts of kindness. Not that anyone could call blowing up a stadium filled with slaverunners and spectators small…

My mission doesn't leave my thoughts for even a second. Straightaway, I fumble in my pocket, searching for the red LED light of my GPS tracker. It's hard to reach with the cuffs on and in the pitch blackness, but I find it nevertheless. I know once I activate it I'll only have five minutes to escape before the bombs are dropped, so it's absolutely critical that I secure myself an escape route before I do. I wish I had just the smallest amount of light to see by, so I could work out how many steps it will take me to reach the door. Every detail matters now. My plan is to activate the device when the guards arrive to take me to my fight, then attack them. I'll be up and out of the arena before the bombs fall.

"What have you got there?" a disembodied voice says to me. It sounds like the voice of an old woman. The cruelty of the slaverunners for putting an elderly woman in an arena for entertainment is unimaginable.

"It's nothing," I say, not knowing whether I can trust her.

"Looks like something to me," comes her reply.

I deliberate whether to tell her more. But then I remind myself that I'm not here to be polite or friendly. I have a mission and nothing should be distracting me from it, even if that something is just a light-hearted conversation with an old woman.

As I'm feeling my way in the gloom along the perimeter wall, I pray the other survivors don't suss out what I'm doing, or haven't been drawn to my movements by the nosy old woman. I can't trust anyone, not even people who in other circumstances would be on the same team as me. I feel guilty knowing that my actions will be causing their deaths, but I have to remind myself that they'd all be dead anyway. At least this way, other people elsewhere will get to live. I shouldn't have to turn them into martyrs, but I have no choice.

As I'm searching for a strategic place to prepare for my attack, I start to hear something that piques my suspicion. It sounds a lot like the distant shouts of a crowd. I listen intently, straining to hear over the sounds of the other prisoners shuffling around in the cell. It is unmistakable. I can hear the sound of an approaching crowd, their cries for blood growing louder and louder and louder.

The old woman who'd spoken to me before must hear it too.

"Must be a special event," she says. "There ain't usually fights this early in the day."

I want to ask her how she can even tell what time of day it is, since we're in a completely dark cell without any way of seeing outside, but I have more important things to think about. A special event could only mean one thing: the slaverunners have announced my arrival. I knew I'd be a draw for the crowds but I didn't realize I'd be such a draw that they would move the games forward to the middle of the day. I won't get the evening to prepare at all. They're holding a special fight, right here, right now.

A jolt of panic races through me. I've barely been here twenty minutes and already the plan is diverging off course. My escape route hasn't been planned. I haven't had time to figure out what I'm doing.

Suddenly I hear the sound of footsteps approaching from outside. They're coming for me. The lock screeches as someone opens it from the other side of the door, then a slaverunner appears, a silhouette against the dim light coming from outside.

"Brooke Moore," he says. I recognize his voice as the slaverunner who first captured me back out in the city. "You were right about you being a crowd pleaser. The second we said we had you, our leader called a fight. A special fight. You're coming to the arena."

I try to keep calm. Everything's happening more quickly than I was expecting—it's barely been four hours since I left Ryan, Ben, Charlie, Dad, Bree, and Penelope at the gates of the compound—but I have to keep my wits about me. I'm a soldier, a fighter, I can do what I have to do. The time is now. The moment has arrived.

The old woman begins to chuckle. "Oh, *you're* the special event. Well, good luck to you."

I turn and glare at her, at her wizened face. She's missing all her teeth and her hands are gnarled.

But I don't have time for anger, I have work to do. I reach into my pocket for the GPS device. But before my thumb hits the button, the woman screams.

"She's got something in her pocket!"

Chaos breaks out in the cell as prisoners start panicking. I quickly press my thumb into the button, but in my trembling haste I can't tell whether it fully activated or not. I don't get a chance to double check;

the guard is there in one second flat, wrenching my hand and the device out of it. I can't see whether the red blinking light has been activated because the guard drops it on the ground and slams his heavy boot into it.

My insides drop like a ten-ton weight. If I didn't manage to activate it before he destroyed it, the rest of the army won't have seen my signal. They won't know that the moment has arrived much sooner than anyone was anticipating. Even if they did pick up the signal, it would only have been for a split second. They could easily have blinked and missed it. And there won't be anything to guide their missiles. They have one shot to hit their target and now they're going to have to do it blind.

I'm so taken aback by the speed with which everything has changed, I don't even have time to attack. The guard has already grabbed me roughly by the arms and is dragging me from the prison cell. Meanwhile, the sounds of the crowds above intensifies. I can hear their footsteps as they march above my head and take their seats. I'm being taken to the arena and there's nothing I can do about it.

As I'm pulled from the cell, I narrow my eyes at the old woman who turned on me at the very last minute. I know she probably just wanted to survive another day, to not be the one called to fight today, but her callousness has ruined everything. That one decision to call me out might even have changed the course of the future of the world.

The cell door is slammed shut and I'm dragged, stunned, along the corridor. As I go, my calmness completely disappears. In its place comes a frantic, racing heartbeat, a whirring mind, and palms slick with sweat. It's all gone wrong. My worst nightmare has been realized.

I'm heading for Arena 3.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Each one of my footsteps echoes as I am prodded along the corridor by the guard. My mind is a frantic blur. It is so dark down here with only the emergency lights to illuminate the path I can hardly see my hand in front of my face. It makes everything stark. I feel like I am walking into hell.

Slaverunners walk ahead of me and behind me. They must have gotten the lowdown on me. They know what I did in Arena 1, how I killed the leader there, and they're not taking any chances.

The corridor bends, taking me away from the path that leads to freedom, steering me in the opposite direction, toward the jaws of death. I can hear the crowd above stamping their feet, chanting my name. Everyone wants to see me fight, but no one wants to see me survive. They all want to bear witness to my death.

I dig my heels in, my body not letting me move. A slaverunner comes up behind me and kicks me in the small of my back, making me take a stumble forward. I almost lose my footing. Because my hands are bound so tightly, if I fall, there will be nothing I can do to stop myself hitting the floor. I have no choice but to let myself be shoved onward.

Finally, the corridor opens out into a circular room.

"Stand there," one of the slaverunner says, pointing at the ground.

I can just about make out a metal shape on the floor in the middle of the room. It looks like some kind of trap door.

As I step on it, metal cuffs wrap around each of my boots, sticking me to the ground steadfast.

"What is this?" I ask, frustrated to hear my voice trembling. "What's happening?"

The slaverunners don't get a chance to respond, because in that moment a circular panel opens up directly above my head. Stark daylight pours in through the hole above me, blinding me. I turn my head to protect my eyes from the glare. Along with the light, a blast of sound comes down the hole, so loud it's deafening. It's the chanting, screaming, braying crowd. At the same time, I feel someone fiddling with the cuffs around my wrists. They're unlocking me. And that can only mean one thing.

All at once, the ground moves beneath my feet. The metal thing I'm standing on is beginning to rise. My hands are free but my feet are locked into the ground, making sure I don't go anywhere. I rise slowly, the light blinding me. I want to cover my eyes but I know that within a matter of seconds I'll be in an arena where anything could

happen to me. I have to be alert, ready for anything they might throw at me.

A voice booms over the loudspeakers as I rise.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please put your hands together for Brooke Moore!"

The crowd roars, the noise so loud it is deafening.

My head tips through the hole, just enough for me to be able to see the arena before me. It's circular, built in an old sports stadium. The arena is like a desert, with dusty yellow sand covering every inch of the ground. It is completely open to the elements and the blue sky up above me.

The crowds stretch up in the bleachers as far as my eyes can see. I'm shocked to discover that none of them are biovictims. Whereas the spectators in the other cities had been deformed and mutated by radiation, their nuclear fried brains turning them into savage beasts, the people here have no such excuse. They're humans, just like me, ordinary people who survived the war. But every single citizen of the city must be here—the elderly, the young, everyone's turned out to watch my death. I wish I could find a way to empathize with them, to remind myself that they're victims of a brutal society as well. But I just can't do it. They had the same choice I was confronted with back in Arena 1: join them or fight them. They've chosen the path of least resistance and for that, I can never forgive them.

Any residue of shame I felt about blowing this place to smithereens dissipates. These people deserve to die. Now I just hope that I activated the GPS device, that the bombs are on their way. But it's already been five minutes and nothing has happened yet. Whether something's alerted them to my being in danger or not, there's no way of knowing. All I know is that I'm still here, the arena is still standing, and there's no sign of my dad's army. I'm alone.

The platform finishes rising and clunks into place. But my metal cuffs keep me frozen to the spot. I look around, trying to work out what is happening and what I am supposed to do. I'm on high alert, my senses listening out for the smallest sound, my body feeling out for the smallest tremor. Anything that will tell me where my foe is coming from. I don't know what to expect. Arena 1 was like a wrestling ring. Sumo, Shira, Malcolm—all my opponents were celebrity fighters in their own right. But Arena 2 was more like a sport or a game. All the competitors were children my age. They wanted us to die but they wanted to be creative with it. They wanted their crowds to be entertained. I wonder what Arena 3 will be like. It's not giving away any of its secrets yet.

All the while I stand there, I look around at every crevice and cranny in the whole building, praying that somewhere I'll see a way

out, an escape hatch. Other than the disc I stand on, I cannot see a single entryway. But my competitors will have to get in here somehow. Just as soon as they do, I'll make a beeline for it and take my chance at escape.

That's when I see movement from opposite me. Another person is coming out of the ground, rising on their own metal disc. I expect them to be my competitor, but once the disc clicks in place and the dust settles, I realize I am facing a child. She can't be more than twelve years old. She stares at me, terrified, her face completely white.

Suddenly, all around me, children start rising up on discs, clicking into place, until we're in a circle. There are ten in total.

I can feel my stomach roiling at the realization that they're expecting us to fight each other to the death.

The announcer speaks.

"There can only be one survivor. Whoever is left standing will be crowned the winner. Let the games begin."

Suddenly there's a loud honking noise and the metal cuffs across my feet snap open. I'm free to move. To fight.

The crowd begins to cheer. I can feel the anticipation buzzing in the air.

No one moves. None of my fellow competitors prepared to fight one another. But that's when the ground begins to rumble. I wobble on my platform, trying to keep my footing, but the shaking is too great. We begin to stumble from our discs, landing on the desert ground.

The second we do, the desert sand suddenly sifts away through a million pinprick holes in the ground. As it disappears, it reveals a huge metal framework on the floor, like a lattice. Then, out of each gap, a red laser beam bursts out, making a crisscross pattern above my head. The arena has been transformed in a matter of seconds from a barren desert into a strange, futuristic stadium. The crowd goes wild, delighted by what is unfolding before their eyes.

I crouch down, certain that the laser beams mean danger. I know that the electricity in the laser beams won't be strong enough to kill us because that would make the game a huge disappointment. But they're certainly designed to hurt and I don't want to risk touching any of them. I have no idea what they're for when I suddenly see a bright red light coming from one end of the stadium. I look over and see that a huge doorway has been illuminated. It's the exit. They're trying to tempt us toward it. But I'm not about to play their game. It's like a magician, always trying to get you to look in a certain place so they can distract you from the real trick. I won't fall for it. That exit is probably fake anyway. They just want to see my desperation.

Two of the kids race for the exit. The second they do, the laser beams begin moving, chasing them across the desert ground. They scream in pain and collapse to the floor, writhing around as though shocked by electricity.

The crowd is momentarily entertained by the sight, but they quickly grow frustrated at the lack of fighting. As though in response, the laser beams begin to move, rotating so that we have no choice but to move. They're forcing us together. I duck and weave through them, like I'm dancing a horrible dance. I step and leap, crouch and spin, trying to get out of the path of the moving laser beams. I'm hit and the pain is excruciating, like barbed wire all over my body. At last the crowd begins to cheer, pleased to see some suffering for their entertainment. But I know this isn't it. There is more to come. This is just the beginning. This is like the warm-up act, trying to pump up the crowd for the main show.

All at once, the ground begins to vibrate. I can hear the sound of grinding metal coming from somewhere beneath the floor of the stadium. Then two slits open up in the ground and rising from them are giant, twisting blades. The crowd simultaneously oohs, and I feel sick to my stomach.

At the same time, a platform like the one I rose into the arena on appears at the far end, opposite the neon, flashing exit. I can only just about see the silhouette of whatever it is being raised into the arena. All I can tell is that it isn't human. It is some kind of beast, a disgusting, huge, spiny creature. A spotlight appears on the creature. It looks like a giant, spiky earwig covered in mucus. Its pincers click together.

So that's how they're going to play it. If we won't fight each other, then they'll pit man against beast, humans against the deformed creatures our radioactive world has produced. I swallow hard and try to psych myself up. If I can fight crazies and kill radiated wild dogs, I can do this. But none of my dad's training has prepared me for this, and the creature is so revolting it takes every ounce of resolve in my body not to run away.

The crowd goes crazy, cheering and shouting.

There's a split-second pause as the creature takes in the sight of its prey standing defenselessly in front of it, then it launches itself forward, racing toward me and the other children at a frighteningly fast pace.

My heart flies into my throat. The adrenaline pumping through me sharpens my faculties and helps me make sense of what I have to do. I understand how this arena is set up. I have opponents, obstacles, but no weapons, but they didn't go to all this effort just to see us die in five seconds flat. They want to be entertained and that means

watching us fight, having us die one by one. I'm supposed to want the other kids to get killed before me.

I spring forward, racing right at the creature. The crowd gasps, clearly not expecting me to make such a bold move. As though following my movements, the rotating saws crash down. I only just manage to leap out of the way. I fall on my side and go rolling across the hard metal grid floor.

But the creature manages to avoid the blades as well, and remains completely unscathed. It rears up like a centipede, showing off a thousand spindly teeth, then roars. Huge strings of spit hang between its teeth, and a fine mist of hot spit sprays the crowd. They squeal like children at Sea World. Don't they realize they're watching humans fighting for their lives? Have they become so desensitized to violence?

The creature zooms toward me again. I'm up on my feet quick as a flash, racing toward the spinning saws. It was too easy for the creature to duck out of the way of the last blade, so I get a different idea this time. Instead of trying to get one to crash down on it, I'm going to run straight through the middle.

It's a risky maneuver and the crowd knows it. They start bouncing up and down in their seats as I make a beeline straight down the center of the groaning, rotating saws. As I go, they start crashing down, just inches from the place where I last stood. They're so close, I can feel the rush of wind created by each slam.

The creature is right behind me, right on my tail. Just as its pincers reach out to snap me up, one of the blades crashes down. I'm thrown forward by the force and land chest down on the hard ground. The wind is knocked out of me and I wince. Then I look back and see that barely a foot behind me, the creature is twitching against the metal ground, a saw rammed right through its head and black, sticky, gooey blood oozing out of it.

Across the other side of the arena, a group of about five of the children are huddled together, staring at me wide-eyed as though in terror. I just have time to spin onto my back when a boy barrels into me.

"Don't fight me, you idiot!" I scream as we roll across the ground.

He pins me down, grappling with me.

"I'm trying to keep you all alive!" I shout back.

As the boy wrestles with me, the ground begins to rumble and the saws start to disappear down into the slits in the grating, taking the disgusting earwig creature with them. The crowd chants my name but I know better than to fall for it. There will be another monster to fight. There always is. These games will only end when the humans die.

I managed to get my knee up and kick the boy in his stomach. He goes flying back and the ground starts to rumble and shake. I know

something else is coming for us, that the arena is about to transform again, but I need a moment to catch my breath. As I take in a deep gasp, I'm suddenly aware of a pungent smell coming from behind me. Whatever is there, the crowd has already seen it, because they start to clap and squeal with excitement.

I flip onto my feet in a crouching stance and spin, coming face to face with three enormous rodent-like creatures. They're completely furless, covered in painful-looking sores and boils, and their eyes glow red. They're each at least six feet long, and the stench coming off them is unbearable. In the crowd, people cover their mouths, but it's all part of the spectacle for them, all part of the evening's entertainment.

The rats see the group of five children huddled in the corner. Within a second, they gobble them up. The boy next to me screams. I cover my mouth, trying to stop myself from retching, and glance around me desperately, searching for somewhere to run and hide. But all around me is nothing but the flat open arena ground.

Then the ground suddenly begins to shake and rumble. A series of walls burst up, so fast I'm knocked off my feet. The giant rats scurry to the far end of the stadium, seemingly afraid. I take my chance and run to the opposite side. Walls spring up all around me, blocking me in, forcing me to backtrack. At the very least, they provide a barrier between me and the boy who was trying to kill me. But when everything stops shaking, I realize what has happened. Surrounding me is a maze.

My heart pounds. I can hear the rats scurrying around at the other end of the stadium. The sound of their claws on the metal grating makes my stomach turn, as does the screaming of the children they are catching and eating. I can smell their odor as it wafts through the maze toward me, but the walls are so high there's no way I can see where they're approaching from. I'm completely blind.

I start running, disorientated and panicked. I've always been a fighter, not a runner. This is completely out of my comfort zone. And it's made worse by the way the ground suddenly rises and falls, by the way the walls suddenly grind and begin to move. I feel frantic, like I'm trapped in a nightmare.

I can hear the pounding feet of the rats from just the other side of the wall and smell their putrid flesh. They are so close. A wall is starting to move and I launch myself at it. It's just low enough for me to pull myself up on top. It springs back up to its full height, and I'm just a few yards above the rats. Their disgusting noses sniff me, but I'm just out of their reach. I run along the top of the wall away from them. While being able to see where they are is useful, it won't help me in any way if I don't find a way to kill them.

I race along the top of the wall, searching for anything that I

might be able to use as a weapon. As I go, I wrack my brains, trying to think of a way to defeat them. It's when I see one of the rats nip the other that I get a brilliant idea. In the last fight, I used the obstacle against the opponent. What about if in this fight, I pit the opponents against one another?

I notice ahead a place where the walls move in and out, forming a block like a prison cell. I know then what I have to do.

"HEY!" I shout at the stinking creatures, trying to get their attention. "I'M UP HERE!"

All three of them turn their disgusting faces up to me, twitching their crusty noses. Revolted by the sight of them, I start to run. My feet slap against the hard wall. The rats are right behind me, chasing so fast, getting so close. I have to time this perfectly or it won't come off at all.

I take a running leap just as one of the walls is starting to rise and manage to grip it by my fingertips. I hang there, dangling helplessly as it continues its slow rise. I try to heave myself up but I can't quite get purchase on the wall. Gritting my teeth, I begin to scrabble and kick, searching for a nick in the wall where I can get my footing. The rats are racing toward me; I can hear them, smell them, can feel the crowd on the edge of their seats with anticipation. Finally, I get my foot onto a rough part of the wall and start to scramble, heaving with all my might. Then, in the nick of time, I'm crouching on the top of the wall.

The rats congregate beneath me, snarling, snapping their teeth. I stand there, trying to catch my breath. I need to time this perfectly.

I turn on top of the wall and watch the one opposite as it begins to lower. Then I jump, right into the enclosed space. It's a complete dead end. The audience has no idea what I'm doing and must think I've chosen suicide, because they all gasp in unison.

I back away, my heart hammering, prepared for the wall ahead of me to lower and my opponents to race in and devour me. The screeching, grinding noise of the walls begins to sound out, and it starts to lower. The rats are clambering over one another, trying to be the first into the small space. Then, just as I hoped, the wall my back is pressed against begins to rotate. I barely have a second to press myself through the gap before it slams shut with a humongous crunching noise. The rats are locked up inside the tiny room on the other side. Within a matter of seconds, I hear the sounds of them tearing one another to pieces. The crowd erupts with applause, thrilled by the spectacle I'm giving them.

But of course, it's not over. There will be more deformed creatures to fight. More races to run and hoops to leap through. I'm their entertainment for the evening. My only chance of survival is if I can draw the game out long into the evening, long enough for the

troops back at the compound to realize I'm in trouble. Right now, I don't care if I die in their bomb blasts. Anything would be preferable to playing this disgusting death game. Right now, a bomb strike would feel like mercy.

As the ground shakes and the maze disappears, I get my first look at the other competitors. Only three of them remain. The boy who attacked me is gone, swallowed by one of the putrid rodents. The sight makes me feel hollow, but the crowd loves it. They roar their approval, loving the entertainment and the way we are being slowly tortured to death. Of all the arenas I've fought, of all the crowds I've faced, these are by far the worst because they know better but have adopted a "rather you than me" attitude. The hatred I feel for them is all consuming.

The ground begins to shake again and when I look down, I see hot, boiling water bubbling up through the grid at my feet. It's so hot, steam curls up with it, and bubbles pop on the surface. Then platforms rise up.

I have no choice. My instinct to survive is stronger than anything inside of me that wants to give up. I grab hold of a rope attached to a podium and start to swing across the burning water. I'm moving like a pendulum, back and forth, the whole time looking down to see what hybrid creature will be sent up to terrorize me. But instead of a creature, the water keeps on rising. My muscles scream in protest as I force myself to climb up the rope, inching myself away from the water that just keeps on rising.

At the other end of the arena, one of the boys loses his grip on the rope. He slips into the boiling water and lets out a bloodcurdling scream. I climb even quicker and manage to pull myself, stomach first, onto the platform. When I look down, I realize that the water is filled with giant, wriggling maggots, at least fifty foot long and completely see-through. Clearly, these animals evolved in hot, radiated, toxic waters.

The crowd squeals as though they find the sight squeamish. I'm so angry with them, with the way they're treating us and the pleasure they're deriding from our fear and misery. But the fight is leaving me. I have no energy to spare to scream at them. All that's left in me will have to go into fighting the maggot-like creatures.

In the water beneath me, they writhe and wriggle around. More keep appearing, squirming, their disgusting transparent bodies making me feel sick. If the audience is expecting me to kill them, they're going to be sorely disappointed. There's no way I'll be able to fight all those disgusting creatures; there are literally hundreds of them.

But the waters are rising, bringing them closer and closer, and there's nowhere left to climb. I can't get any higher.

That's when I realize I'm not supposed to climb or fight. This is the end of the line. For the crowd, the enjoyment comes with the toe-curling anticipation of knowing one of us is about to die, of watching the terror on our faces. I have no choice but to delight them by cowering back from the platform edge.

The water begins lapping at the side of the platform. The maggoty worms are so close to me now I can see their bulbous eyes. They have rows of perforated teeth, like needles. The crowd squeals with delight as another quake begins to shake the podiums. I hear the shrill scream of a girl and know another one of the competitors has fallen into the deathly waters.

I cling on for dear life, praying that I make it out of here alive. But I know it's futile. The end has come.

All at once, the platform tips. My grip on it tightens but I can't hold on forever. My muscles fail me and I let go. I hit the boiling water and scream in time to the gasping crowd of thrill seekers. It feels more like fire than water. I thrash around, screaming at the top of my lungs. But something is changing in the crowd. No one wants to see me die this way; not because it's vicious and brutal, but because it's too cheap. Whoever is controlling the game gets the hint, because suddenly the water that had been filling the stadium suddenly begins to drain away, and before the worm creatures even have a chance to bite me, I'm plummeting down, swirling as the water is sucked away.

I hit the metal grid of the arena ground once more. The worm creatures lie all around me, flapping and gasping in the air, drowning in oxygen, no longer a threat.

The crowd bursts into applause.

I look over and see there's just one other competitor left alive. A boy of roughly eighteen. He's lying on the floor too, his skin red and scalded like mine.

I realize then that there will be no more creatures to fight. It's down to the final two. They want us to kill each other.

With a clunking noise, two swords are dropped into the arena. But I can't even move. I'm exhausted, completely spent. My body feels like it's on fire, the scalding water making every part of me hurt. It feels like I'm back in the desert again, when my body gave up and I just couldn't carry on. My limbs are heavy, and my mind whirring.

I can see the boy rising to his feet, picking up his sword, and, for the first time, I admit to myself that no one is coming to save me. My GPS device failed. The bombs weren't triggered and I will die before anyone realizes too much time has passed. No one was expecting me to be hauled into the arena so soon. As far as they know, I'm still a prisoner within the compound, plotting out my plan of escape. But in reality, I've failed in the one thing I had to do. I will die in this place

and the world will keep on turning, just as brutal as before. Children will keep being stolen and survivors will keep fighting to the death in arenas until there's nothing left of the old human race, nothing to show for all our accomplishments. I will die and there will be hell on earth.

The boy's face appears above me, the sword glinting. He looks mournful, like he doesn't want to kill me but knows he has to. I lie there, unable to move. But something catches his eye. There's something coming toward us, floating as lightly as a feather on the wind. It's coming from the audience. Someone has thrown a piece of white cloth, or a feather, in our direction. We watch it float down. Is it some kind of peace offering? I look up and scan the crowd, trying to see the person who threw it. When I do, my heart stops beating.

There, in the crowd amongst the other spectators, are Ben and Ryan.

I don't think I've ever been more happy to see them in my life. They leap over the barriers and start running for me.

"Intruders!" the commentator cries.

I try to rise to my feet, finding my legs weak beneath me. Then suddenly their arms loop beneath mine and I'm wrenched to my feet.

"What are you doing here?" I cry to Ben and Ryan.

"We're your plan B," Ryan says.

"We're getting you out of here," Ben says, holding me close.

I wince, my scalded flesh sending bolts of pain through my body where he touches me. I notice Ryan is holding a GPS device and he hits it, turning the blinking red light into a solid one. The army has been mobilized. We have five minutes to get out of here before the whole place blows.

The crowd erupts into pandemonium. Half of them seem to be loving the abrupt change in course; the other half are angry to have been cheated out of seeing me and the boy fight to death.

But the boy doesn't seem to understand what's happening. He must think Ben and Ryan have been sent to help me kill him. He charges us, his sword raised.

Ryan snatches up the sword that was dropped for me and turns. Their swords clang together.

Ben gets to the metal disc that delivered me into the stadium and uses some kind of device in his hand, a tool of some sort, to ram the edge of the disc. It opens.

"RYAN!" I scream behind me. "COME ON!"

"GO!" he shouts. "While you still can!"

Ben tugs my arm and all at once we plummet downward, through the hole.

We hit the ground hard, winded. I feel one of my ribs crack on

impact and take a sharp breath. The hole above closes over, plunging us into darkness. We're back underground, and Ryan is trapped up in the arena.

"NO!" I scream, my voice tearing from my lungs.

But Ben keeps on tugging me, pulling me, forcing me to move on. We only have a matter of minutes to get out of the arena before the whole thing blows.

I'm hardly in a fit enough state to run. Ben has to hold me close to him to keep me on my feet. Numb with grief, I'm somehow able to trace my steps back through the twisting, labyrinthine underground. From above, the audience is roaring, the commentator desperately trying to quell the chaos. It sounds like we've started a riot.

I'm hardly able to stand. I wince with every step. But we reach the very last corridor and race up the very last staircase. Then all at once, we burst out into the desert heat, into the abyss of nothing. We're free from the arena.

We start running full speed, knowing we only have a few minutes before the arena blows up. Even from outside we can hear the angry crowd. Shots start ringing out and it occurs to me that the slaverunners have opened fire on their own people.

As we race across the expanse, away from the arena, I hear the whining sound of bombs flying through the air.

The bombs hit and explode, the force so strong Ben and I are both flung forward. Heat blasts my face, singeing my hair. I land with a hard thud on my back and my head slams against the asphalt, making me bite down hard on my tongue.

I taste blood in my mouth. There's a ringing in my ears that's beyond painful. I'm completely dazed, unable to move or think or get my thoughts in any kind of order. Acrid smoke billows above me. I manage to roll over onto my chest. A little way behind me, I can see Ben lying face down on the ground. He's completely still and I pray that he's just been knocked unconscious. Behind him, I can see a scene of utter carnage. Enormous flames are leaping into the air, and bits of metal and body parts rain down. I duck as pieces of the arena grating thud just an inch to the side of my head.

I look back and see that where the arena stood is now nothing more than a smoldering crater. The bomb obliterated everything. It wiped out thousands of people in one blast.

There is no arena. There is no Ryan.

Then the world turns black.

EPILOGUE

They tell me this is what victory feels like. But I can't bring myself to celebrate. Not when I wake from my coma two days later in Dad's compound in Houston as a hero, nor when I'm reunited with Bree. I don't celebrate when my dad tells me how proud he is of me for what I've done.

We won. The plan to destroy the arenas simultaneously went off without a hitch. Or at least it did as far as everyone else is concerned. No one knows about the grueling hours I spent in Arena 3, fighting for my life against the vicious mutants the nuclear war created. Nor does anyone know what Ben and Ryan did for me, about how they both had a gut feeling that something was wrong, and how they put their differences aside to unite and help me with their secret plan B. No one realizes that if it weren't for them, I would have died in the arena, our whole plan would have fallen apart, and we'd all be under slaverunner control right now.

I know I'll never be able to tell them, that I will never be able to admit that I screwed up the most important thing I was ever going to do. I have to accept their praise even though I don't deserve it. I have to let them comfort me over Ryan mysteriously running away from the compound, knowing I will never be able to tell anyone that he is in fact dead because of me.

No one knows any of that. They all believe, when they found me unconscious in the desert, that my skin had been burned by the bomb's blast. They all needed me to be their hero and so I had no choice but to accept.

Only Ben seems to understand why I am so subdued. He knows why I don't dance and drink and celebrate like the rest of them. Like always, it's Ben who understands that what I have experienced has marked me, damaged me, possibly forever. The only good thing to come out of all of this is that I know we'll be by each other's side, silent, supporting, not needing to speak to understand where the other is coming from.

In the first week after the arenas are obliterated, we receive a message from a squad in the Midwest. Arena 4 has fallen, its prisoners liberated. They're all on buses heading south since we have the infrastructure in place and plenty of food to support them. But still I don't celebrate.

In the second week, we get an even bigger surprise when the Commander from Fort Noix arrives with his troops. He admits he was wrong to ignore my dad's appeal for help. He vows to do everything he can to help, and they strike up a bargain to take in a thousand

orphans from the fallen cities and rescued from the sex trade. They'll be placed with families in the cabins in the woods.

But even this is not enough for me to celebrate. Nor is the moment when Charlie and Bree's friendship blossoms into first love, nor when Zeke and Stephan are rescued from Memphis, nor the moment when I am finally able to look Ben in the eye and tell him that I love him, that I finally can be with him in the way he wants me to be.

The point when I am finally able to smile for the first time comes a whole year later.

* * *

It is a week before the newly formed American army begins mobilizing into the deserts, and a month after the first full, reestablished communication device between the different compounds becomes fully operable. I'm sitting in my bedroom in my dad's house. Ben's asleep in my bed, his hair mussed up. Sunlight streams through the curtains, illuminating his pale torso, making him look more beautiful than ever. There's a faint knock at my door.

"Come in," I say.

Bree tips her head around the door. When she sees Ben asleep in my bed, she turns bright red.

"Yes?" I ask her, amused by her embarrassment.

"Dad wants to see you," she says.

Ben stirs and, realizing he is revealing a little more than he'd like, quickly pulls the cover up to his armpits.

"Hey," he says to Bree.

She just turns around and darts out the door.

I go over to Ben and bring my arms around his neck. Then I lean down and plant a slow, lingering kiss on his lips.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," I say. "Did you sleep well?"

"Perfectly," he replies. "What did Bree want?"

"She said Dad wanted to see me," I say, getting up from the bed. "Coming? I'll make you breakfast."

Ben grins and slips on his clothes.

We go through the corridor of the bungalow and find Dad in the kitchen. Bree is sitting at the table with him. He smiles when he sees the both of us.

"What is it?" I say. "Bree said you wanted to see me."

"I do," he replies. "I've got some news for you. Sit."

I exchange a glance with Ben, then we both take a seat.

"I received a call from a compound in California today," Dad

begins. “They told us that the arena there has fallen. The city has been reclaimed.”

I gasp.

“That was the last one?” I say, feeling my heart begin to thud.

Dad nods. “It was the last one.”

I can hardly believe it. It’s real. America has finally been rid of its arenas. No more fighting will ever take place in them again.

Dad steps forward and gives me a long hug. In that hug, I can feel all the years of grief, of agony, begin to melt. I can feel a new beginning forming.

I look from my sister, to my dad, to the boy I have finally let myself fall in love with. And then I smile.

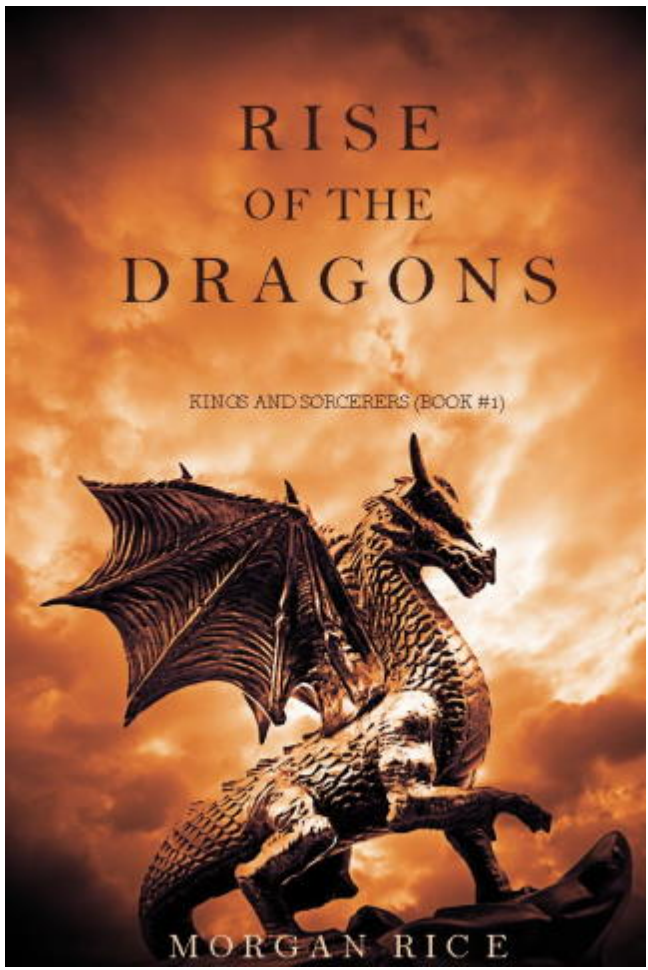
Today, I realize, *life can begin again.*

Author Note

Thank you so much for reading all three Arena novels. I am so honored that you've read them all! I hope you'll continue on this journey with me. Although this is the final installment of my dystopian novels, you might enjoy one of my other series. You might especially enjoy RISE OF THE DRAGONS, which features another tough female protagonist who I am sure you will fall in love with! If you like Brooke, you will love Kyra! Read it for free and let me know what you think! I can't wait to hear!

Best wishes,

Morgan



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> *—Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos*

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When Kyra comes of age and the local lord comes to take her away, her father wants to wed her off to save her. Kyra, though, refuses, and she journeys out on her own, into a dangerous wood, where she encounters a wounded dragon—and ignites a series of events that will change the kingdom forever.

15 year old Alec, meanwhile, sacrifices for his brother, taking his place in the draft, and is carted off to The Flames, a wall of flames a hundred feet high that wards off the army of Trolls to the east. On the far side of the kingdom, Merk, a mercenary striving to leave behind his dark past, quests through the wood to become a Watcher of the Towers and help guard the Sword of Fire, the magical source of the kingdom's power. But the Trolls want the Sword, too—and they prepare for a massive invasion that could destroy the kingdoms forever.

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>
> *—Midwest Book Review, D. Donovan, eBook Reviewer*

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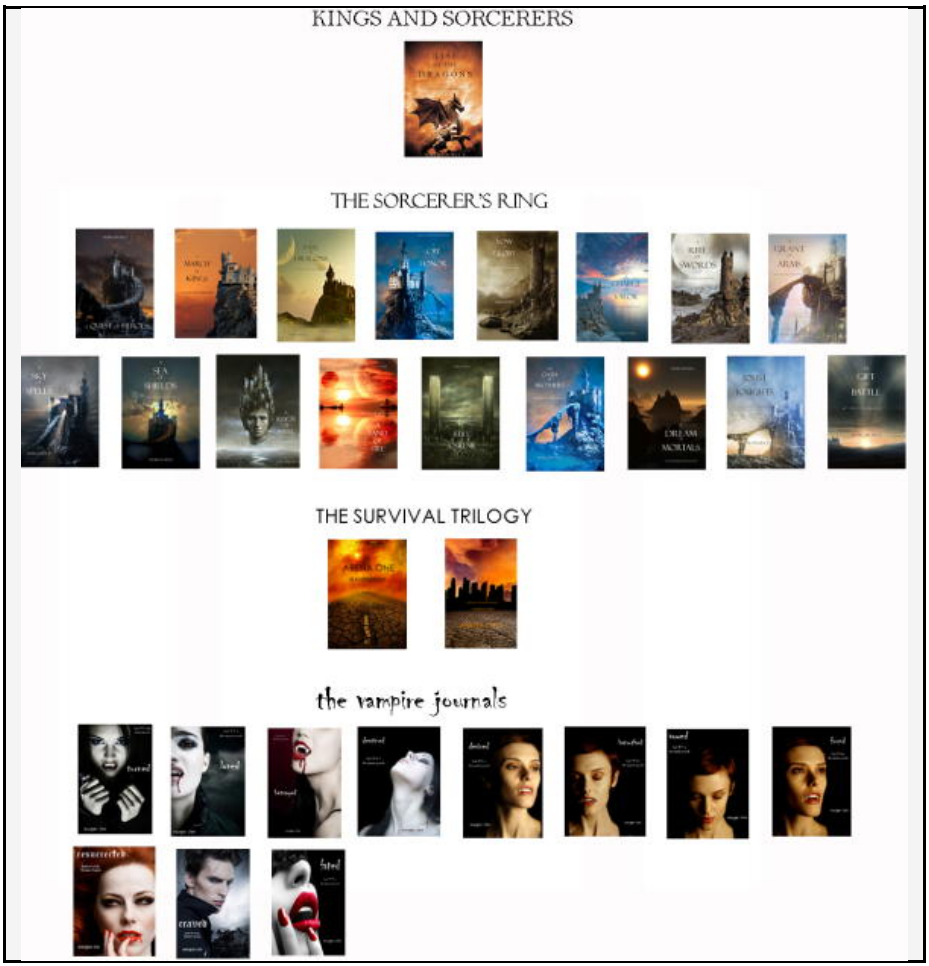

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SLAVE, WARRIOR, QUEEN (Book #1)

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About Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising seventeen books; of the #1 bestselling series THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, comprising twelve books; of the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising two books (and counting); of the epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS, comprising six books; and of the new epic fantasy series OF CROWNS AND GLORY. Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

Morgan loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.morganricebooks.com to join the email list, receive a free book, receive free giveaways, download the free app, get the latest exclusive news, connect on Facebook and Twitter, and stay in touch!

Select Acclaim for Morgan Rice

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